

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 1981

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ANITA GOLDSTEIN
Publishers

CHARLES E. FRITCH
Editor

ROMELLE GLASS
Art Director

LINDA TOLAN
Graphic Artist

LEO MARGULIES
Founder

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Shayne was tied in the chair, unable to move, and the stocky man was having fun slamming fists into the detective's body and face. No matter what the man did to him, Shayne wasn't about to put Lucy in danger. It looked like it was going to be a long night!

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MICHAEL SHAYNE SWAM SLOWLY UP through the blackness that engulfed him. He had been sleeping soundly, dreamlessly. But no matter how deep a sleep he had been in, his years spent in a dangerous business had honed his senses to the point where they automatically warned him of anything out of the ordinary. He forced his eyes open, but saw nothing except the shadows of the bedroom in his Second Avenue apartment.

He sat up, the covers back, and swung his long legs off the side of the bed. A frown pulled the craggy red brows over his grey eyes down. He listened closely, but heard nothing. *Something* had disturbed him, though, and he knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep until he knew what it was. He reached out to the little night table beside the bed, took a pistol from its drawer. Even in darkness, Shayne handled the gun like it was merely an extension of his own body.

He stood up and moved toward the window. Flicking one of the curtains back a fraction of an inch, he looked out, but he saw nothing unusual. The Miami night was dark and quiet. Shayne glanced at the luminous dial of the clock beside the bed. It told him the time was just past three o'clock.

In his bare feet, he padded over to the bedroom door. No light was showing beneath it; the rest of the apartment was dark, as it was supposed to be. He put his hand on the doorknob, turning it slowly and carefully until the door was ready to be thrown open. He gripped the pistol tighter in his other hand. His muscles tensed —

The cry came again.

Shayne stiffened as it began, but then the grim look on his face became one of disgust. There was no mistaking what was causing the unhappy wail. He wasn't surprised that it had woken him. It was loud enough to disturb even the soundest sleeper, and it sounded close by.

It was a baby.

Shayne wheeled around and went back across the room to replace the pistol in the drawer. Then he scooped up the receiver of the telephone extension on top of the table and dialed the desk in the lobby downstairs.

The night clerk picked up his phone before one ring had been completed, and Shayne said, "Jack, this is Mike Shayne. Does somebody on this floor have a baby in their place? There's a hellacious racket up here."

The clerk sounded harried as he replied, "No, sir, nobody's supposed to have a baby up there. None of the tenants have children, as far as I know. They're not supposed to, I know that."

That was what Shayne had thought. Children visited occasionally in the building, but none of them were supposed to live there. Still, there was no doubt in his mind as to what was producing that cry, which was now trailing off.

"Maybe they're not supposed to be here," he told the clerk, "but I heard a baby. Maybe you'd better check it out."

"Yes, sir, I was just going to. Two more tenants called to report hearing a baby crying."

That was good to hear, Shayne thought. It proved he wasn't imagining things, though he had known that already. He thanked the clerk and hung up, then went out into the main room of his apartment.

Wearing only the bottoms of his pajamas, he flipped a lamp on and crossed the room to a sturdy liquor cabinet. He was wide awake now, as often happened when a very sound sleep was disturbed, and a drink might make the disturbance of his slumber a little less jarring. He took a bottle of Martell from the cabinet and carried it toward the kitchen.

When he had several inches of the cognac tipped into a tumbler, he sipped it gratefully and reached for a cigarette. There was a pack on the kitchen counter, and he had just taken one out when he froze again.

There it was again, that loud, insistent crying. Shayne said, "Dammit," and went back into the living room. Now that he was more alert and out of the bedroom, he could tell that the sound was coming from somewhere closer than he had thought. In fact, it sounded like it was coming from just outside the door in the hall.

Shayne stalked across the room, anger making his lean face even more gaunt than usual, and jerked the door open. He leaned out, looking fiercely up the hall.

And the sound came again, right under his nose.

Shayne looked down. His features lost their anger, and a vaguely sick expression took its place. He said softly, "Ah, hell. This has got to be a joke."

If it was a joke, it was a little blanket-wrapped one, lying in a plastic basket, its face all screwed-up and unhappy, its tiny fists clenched tightly, its nearly-bald head with a wispy tonsure of down-like hair tossing from side to side as it got ready to let loose another ear-grating cry. As the sound burst from it, Shayne said again, with even more feeling, "Hell!"

Who the devil would leave a baby at his door?

DOWN THE HALL, THE DOOR OF THE ELEVATOR SLID OPEN, and the night clerk came hurrying out, looking around for the source of the complaints he was getting from his tenants. He stopped short, surprise washing over his face, as he saw Mike Shayne picking up the basket from the floor of the hall.

Shayne didn't really know why he did it, other than hoping that the kid would shut up. The basket felt awkward in his big rough hands. He swung it from side to side, rocking it as gently as he could. The motion must have done something to the baby, because the wailing died down and then quit entirely.

Shayne looked up and saw the clerk. He snapped, "Dammit, don't just stand there!"

The clerk hurried down the hall, looking confused. He said, "Mr. Shayne! Where did you get the baby?"

Shayne bit back a sarcastic retort about storks and cabbage leaves and said, "I found it out here, right in front of my door. Do you know this kid, Jack?"

The clerk bent over the bundle in Shayne's arms and moved the blanket a little bit to get a better look at the child's face. It was a red, angry face, even though it had quieted down since being picked up by Shayne. The clerk looked up and said, "No, sir, I don't think I ever

saw him before. Or her, whatever. But all babies look alike to me, Mr. Shayne."

"All right," Shayne sighed heavily. "I'd say we've got a problem on our hands."

"You want me to call the cops?"

"I doubt that the kid has broken any laws. Of course, we could turn it over to the juvenile authorities." Shayne frowned again, then shook his head abruptly at his own words. "No, somebody had to have what they thought was a good reason for leaving a squalling kid at my door. I want to find out what it is. I'll handle this, Jack."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Shayne," the clerk replied, clearly glad that he didn't have to make any decisions concerning the child. "You'll have to try to keep it from making so much noise, though, or I'll keep getting complaints."

Shayne turned a bleak expression on the clerk, who excused himself and left hurriedly, disappearing into the elevator. Using a foot to shut the door behind him, Shayne carried the baby into the apartment and on into the kitchen. He set the basket down on the counter, hoping the child wouldn't start crying again.

It didn't. Instead, it looked up at Shayne with eyes now wide and curious. Those eyes were blue, Shayne saw.

He stared at the child for a long moment, then went back into the living room. Picking up the phone there, he rapidly dialed a familiar number.

The phone on the other end rang about ten times before it was picked up and a sleepy voice said, "Yeah? Whazzit . . . whozis?"

"Wake up, Tim," Shayne barked. "I just got a little present, and I want a straight answer. Did you have anything to do with it?"

"What . . . Present, what kind of present? Ohhh . . . Mike? Is that you? Do you know what time it is?"

"I know what time it is," Shayne said to Timothy Rourke, the top reporter for the *Miami Daily News* and one of Shayne's oldest friends. "And I want to know what you've been up to tonight?"

"I've been sleeping, dammit," Rourke answered, sounding more awake now. "What's going on, Mike."

Shayne considered. Rourke was capable of a good acting job, but Shayne doubted if he was that good. He had sounded as if he had been honestly startled out of a sound sleep, just the way Shayne had been earlier. And if this was a practical joke perpetrated by the reporter, Shayne doubted that Rourke could have lasted through more than a few words of conversation without breaking up in laughter.

"Somebody left something for me here at the apartment," Shayne

said carefully. "I just thought you might have had something to do with it, knowing your warped sense of humor."

"Gee, thanks," Rourke said, voice heavy with sarcasm. "You call me at three o'clock in the morning and then say that *I* have a warped sense of humor. I really appreciate that, Mike — "

The baby picked that moment to let out another squall.

Shayne tried to clap a hand over the receiver so that Rourke wouldn't hear, but he was too late. Rourke broke off his previous grousing and said quickly, "Was that a baby I heard, Mike? What's going on there?"

"Just forget it, Tim. Go back to sleep."

"Wait a minute. You said somebody left something for you at your apartment, and then a baby cries . . ." Shayne could almost see the broad grin on Rourke's face. "You mean somebody actually left a *baby* on your doorstep? Ha! I can see the headlines now — PATER-NITY SUIT FOR FAMOUS PRIVATE DETECTIVE! We'll get a picture of you holding the kid — "

Shayne growled and hung up. Tim Rourke giving him the business was all he needed right now . . .

THE BABY WAS STILL CRYING, NO DOUBT UNHAPPY at being left alone in the kitchen. Shayne sighed and went back to it, hefting the basket again. The crying continued, as the baby waved its little fists.

Maybe it was hungry, Shayne thought. Holding it carefully, he turned to the refrigerator and opened the door. Unfortunately, he took most of his meals out, and he doubted if an infant would be interested in a jar of olives or a salami. And the jug of milk he had was sour, he discovered when he uncapped it. Shutting the door, he looked around the kitchen almost desperately, the wailing still going on. His eyes fell on the bottle of Martell . . .

He shook his head abruptly. That wouldn't do. Carefully, he put the basket back on the counter and then lifted the baby out of it. Closer contact with another human being might help, Shayne reasoned, holding the bundle to his bare chest. He swayed from side to side slowly, making a rough approximation of cooing sounds in this throat.

The baby settled down and seemed to snuggle closer to him. Shayne looked down at it, suddenly wondered if it was a boy or a girl. The question hadn't even occurred to him until that moment. He moved the blanket slightly, noting that it was blue, and sure enough, the child was a little boy. Shayne kept rocking it gently.

He was sure he looked like a damn fool.

Moving into the living room, he went back to the telephone table

across from the door. Cradling the baby in one arm, he lifted the receiver and then dialed with the same hand. When he heard the phone on the other end ringing, he propped the receiver between his shoulder and his ear.

Once again, it took several rings for the other party to answer, but this time, instead of Rourke, a soft, slightly Southern accented female voice spoke in Shayne's ear.

"It's me, Angel," he said in a near whisper, still feeling foolish. "I've got a little problem. Can you come over here?"

"What is it, Michael?" Lucy Hamilton asked. She was the most efficient secretary a private detective could ask for, and much more besides, and Shayne felt better just hearing her voice. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "But somebody left something here for me. It's a baby, Angel."

"A baby!" Lucy exclaimed. "Michael, are you sure? I mean . . . Well, of course, you're sure . . ."

"I know what you mean. It threw *me* for a loop, too. But it's a baby, all right, a little boy about five or six months old, I'd guess. Hell, what do I know about babies, though."

"I'll be right over. That poor little thing! Nobody there to take care of it except a big rough man."

Shayne looked down at the child, who seemed to be about half-asleep in his arms now, and said dryly, "Oh, we're doing all right. I could still use some help, though. You might stop at an all-night grocery store and get whatever babies eat. We can't very well give the kid cognac."

"I should say not." Lucy hesitated, then asked, "Michael . . . Who would leave a baby at your door?"

"Now that's something I don't know, Angel," Shayne said. "But I sure as hell intend to find out."

II

THERE HAD BEEN A LOT OF UNUSUAL HAPPENINGS in Shayne's Flagler Street office during the years he had been a private detective in Miami, but this was the first time he could recall it serving as a nursery.

The child was snugly and happily settled in a bassinet that Lucy had brought with her this morning. As Shayne watched the lovely brown-haired secretary fussing over the baby, he thought again how lucky he had been to have someone like her to call on the night before.

She had arrived at his apartment quickly after his call, bringing infant's formula with her. Shayne had had to keep on holding the baby to keep it from crying, but as soon as Lucy reached out for him, he went to her gladly. Shayne had heaved a grateful sigh and gone to put some clothes on.

The baby went to sleep after Lucy fed it, using the bottles she had bought along with the formula. Then she and Shayne sat down on the sofa, and the big detective told her what little he knew about the strange events of the night.

"I can't imagine why anyone would just leave an adorable little baby like that for a stranger to find," Lucy said. "I know I never could."

"I just hope we can get to the bottom of this," Shayne grunted.

"You're not going to turn him over to the juvenile authorities in the morning?"

Shayne shook his head. "Somebody put him there on purpose. If they just wanted to abandon him, why bring him up on the second floor of the building and down to the end of the hall? I think whoever left him there knew that was the door to my apartment."

"So you're just going to *keep* him? Michael, you can't do that."

Shayne tugged at the lobe of his left ear and looked thoughtful. "I don't think it'll be for long, Angel. If there was a reason someone picked me to play godfather, we ought to be finding it out before long."

Lucy chuckled. "You did look awfully cute holding the little fellow when I came in."

Shayne frowned fiercely. "Now hold on. I told you, I just want to get to the bottom of this thing."

"Speaking of bottoms, Michael, do you know how to change a diaper?"

Now, sitting in his office and regarding the baby sleeping peacefully a few feet away, Shayne had to smile. There was a bittersweet quality about the expression, though. He had learned how to change a diaper years before, when it looked like he would be a father himself. But that had been when his wife Phyllis was still alive. They had never had the children they wanted during the time they were together. This little fellow now . . . He would be well taken care of, Shayne knew. He and Lucy would both see to that.

His intercom buzzed. He flipped the switch, and Lucy said, "I've got Tim on the phone, Michael, like you asked."

"Thanks, Angel." Shayne picked up the phone. "Listen, Tim, he said quickly, "think you can hold the wisecracks long enough for me to ask you a question?"

"I guess so," Rourke's voice came back over the wire. "But you'd better make it quick."

"Have you heard any rumors about recent kidnappings? Something the cops might be trying to keep quiet?"

There was a moment of silence as Rourke thought it over, then he said, "Nothing comes to mind, Mike. I'll check it out for you, though, and get back to you later, if you want."

"That'd be great. Why don't we meet for lunch?"

"Sure." Rourke paused again. "I seem to remember seeing something, not recently, about a kidnapping. Maybe I'll be able to put my finger on it by lunchtime. Do you really think somebody might have dropped a kidnapping victim on you like that, Mike?"

"Could be. Or it could have been just some scared teenage mother who didn't want anything more to do with the kid. I want to find out for sure, though."

"Right. See you later, Mike . . . and try not to spike the kid's formula."

Shayne hung up, grimacing. Rourke had held out longer than he had really expected the reporter to.

There were voices in the outer office. Shayne looked up as the door between the rooms opened and Lucy stepped through. Her face was taut, as was her voice when she spoke.

"Michael," she said, "the baby's mother is here."

LUCY STEPPED ASIDE AND LET ANOTHER WOMAN into the office. The newcomer was tall, slender, and dark-haired, not overly attractive but with a pleasant face. As Shayne stood up, she said, "Mr. Shayne? I'm so sorry. I've come to get —"

She broke off as she spotted the baby. A quick step took her to the side of the bassinet, and she started to reach down to pick up the child.

"Just a minute," Shayne snapped. "You can't just waltz in here and grab that kid."

The woman looked over her shoulder at him, puzzled. "But I'm his mother," she said.

"I don't know that," Shayne insisted.

"Of course. My name is Roberta Hightower. I have identification." She opened her purse and took out a wallet, opening it to show Shayne a Florida driver's license. He made a quick mental note of the address on it, then nodded curtly.

Roberta Hightower turned back toward the baby, but again Shayne stopped her with a curt statement. "The baby doesn't have a driver's

license. How do I know who he is?"

The woman was starting to flush and look uncomfortable. "See here, Mr. Shayne, I know my own baby. And this is my baby. I want him back."

"And I want to know why the hell you dumped him in front of my door."

Lucy was still standing in the doorway, and she looked warmly at Shayne. She put in, "That's right. Why would you want to leave such a nice baby and run off like that?"

"I . . . I didn't run off," Roberta Hightower said shakily. "It . . . it was the baby's father, Mr. Shayne. You see, we're divorced, and I've got custody. My ex-husband *stole* the baby from me two days ago, and I've been looking for him ever since. I've even spoken to the police, though I didn't really want to get my ex-husband in trouble. Still, I wanted my baby back. And now I've got him."

"Is that so?" Shayne took a cigarette out and started to light it, but a stern look and a shake of the head from Lucy made him stop. "If it was your ex-husband who had the kid," Shayne went on, "why would he leave it for me to find? And how did you know I had the kid?"

The woman was beginning to look really flustered now. She said, "Why . . . why, the police told me you had the baby. They said you reported finding him —"

Shayne was shaking his head, and the look on his face was bleak. "Strike three," he said. "You don't have any way of identifying the kid, you don't even call him by name, nor do you call your ex-husband by name, and now you say the cops told you I had the kid. Wrong, lady. The cops don't even know about it."

Roberta Hightower took a step backwards, taking her closer to the door. She stammered, "Y-you've got me all c-confused. That's my baby, and I've been so worried about him, I couldn't think straight. That's all it is!"

Shayne moved out from behind the desk. "You left him there in the hall, didn't you?" he accused. "You'd better tell me why, and fast, or I will call the cops in on this!"

"No . . . You don't understand."

"We certainly don't!" Lucy flared. "First you abandon this baby, then you try to take him back with no explanation that makes sense, and you expect us to let you have him. Well, we're not going to do it!"

Roberta Hightower's shoulders shook, and a sob escaped her throat. "You don't understand," she repeated. "I have to have that baby!"

Shayne saw her hand go into the still-open purse again, but he hadn't expected it to come out holding a gun. He started to lunge to-

ward her, but the barrel of the little pistol staring him in the eye brought him up short.

"Stop!" she cried. "I'm taking the baby, whether you like it or not. Now stand back."

SHAYNE SAW LUCY TENSING, BUT HE DIDN'T KNOW whether she intended ducking back into the outer office where she could try to summon help, or whether it was her plan to jump the woman with the gun. Either way, it would be risky. He said sharply, "Forget it, Angel! We can't have any gunplay with that kid in here."

Roberta Hightower nodded. "That's smart. You just remember your own advice, Mr. Shayne." She kept the gun trained on him while gesturing to Lucy with her other hand. "You! Move over beside the desk."

Lucy did as she was commanded, reluctantly. As she moved over beside him, Shayne put a hand on her arm and squeezed reassuringly.

The woman with the gun moved backwards until she was beside the bassinet again. It was awkward for her, trying to keep Shayne and Lucy covered while she reached down with her other hand and picked up the baby, but she managed it. She cradled the child and then started toward the door.

Shayne saw the baby's eyes opening. He looked up drowsily at the woman carrying him, opened his mouth . . .

— And wailed with all the power in his little lungs.

The woman jumped, startled, and the gun in her other hand pointed momentarily at the floor. In that instant, Shayne was throwing himself across the office.

One of his hands slapped the gun free, while the other grabbed desperately for the baby. Roberta Hightower let out a startled gasp as the child slipped from her precarious grip in her surprise.

Shayne's blunt fingers fastened on the baby's arm, supporting it for the split-second he needed to get his other hand under it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lucy leaping into the fray, a furious expression on her normally-beautiful face.

Shayne spun toward the bassinet and put the crying infant in it quickly but gently. He heard the sharp little cries and the shuffling sounds of a scuffle behind him, and when he turned around, he saw Lucy forcing the woman up against the wall. As he took a step toward the fighting women, Roberta Hightower's fist came around in an excellent left hook and slammed into Lucy's jaw.

The punch knocked Lucy backwards. She crashed into Shayne, throwing them both off-balance. Shayne grabbed her instinctively to

keep her from falling as they staggered backwards.

As he struggled to get his feet working properly again, he saw the woman ducking into the outer office, heard the slam of its door a second later. As Lucy got her balance back and hurried over to check on the still-shrieking baby, Shayne ran out of the office and saw that the elevator had just arrived at the first floor.

The office was only on the second floor, and he took the stairs down to the lobby three at a time. As he emerged into the lobby, he saw the woman getting into a car parked at the curb outside, on the passenger side. Someone else was behind the wheel.

The car gunned away from the curb just as Shayne reached the door of the building. He got a good enough look at it to see that it was dark, late-model sedan, and that the license plate on the rear of it was smeared with mud and unreadable. Then it was taking the nearest corner with a squeal of tires and was gone.

LUCY WAS HOLDING THE BABY WHEN HE CAME BACK into the office, walking back and forth slowly and rocking it, trying to calm it down. Shayne asked, "The little fella all right?"

Lucy paused in her cooing long enough to say, "He seems to be fine, Michael, just scared. What are you doing?"

Shayne had the phone at his ear and was dialing savagely. "Calling a guy in the Driver's License Bureau who owes me a favor."

Ten minutes later, the baby was quietly resting in Lucy's arms and Shayne was hanging up the phone. The big redhead said, "I suspected as much. That license she had was a phony. As far as the driver's license people know, Roberta Hightower doesn't exist."

"And I'll bet that story she told about her ex-husband taking the baby was just as phony."

"No bet, Angel. She was lying from the word go."

"You do think she was the one who abandoned the baby, though, don't you?"

Shayne nodded. "I'm pretty sure she was. She knew where to come to look for him. I thought she looked a little surprised to find out he was here. I imagine she thought I'd turn him over to the authorities. I've got a hunch she brought the baby to me, and somebody else didn't like it very much."

"So what do we do now?"

"Hang onto him and wait for the next move," Shayne said. "We know there's something wrong going on now, and for that little guy's sake, we're going to find out what."

III

NOTHING ELSE UNUSUAL HAPPENED AS THE MORNING went by, and the respite gave Shayne a chance to catch up on the never-ending paperwork of his profession. The baby dozed calmly in his bassinet now. He woke up twice and demanded attention, once for feeding and once for changing, but Lucy handled that. When it was approaching noon, Shayne called Lucy into his office and said, "I think I'll take you and the kid back to your apartment. It might be a good idea if you took care of him there."

Lucy nodded. "All right. Why not take him back to your place, though?"

"Whoever it is that's after him knows where I live. They know where this office is, too. But they may not know where your apartment is. That may well be the safest place for the kid."

"I'll need to stop by the store and pick up a few more things, if I'm going to be keeping him at home."

"Fine. We'll all go."

They closed up the office a few minutes later and headed for Lucy's apartment in Shayne's Buick, leaving her car in the parking garage. Shayne stopped at a shopping center on the way, staying in the car with the baby while Lucy went into the stores. He kept his eyes open, in case they had been followed from the office, but there was no sign of trouble. The baby was lying in his basket in the front seat, next to Shayne, eyes open, making soft mewling sounds. He seemed happy enough, and Shayne wondered what it was about his ugly puss that seemed to calm the kid. He caught himself starting to say, "Gitchey, gitchey," once, made a disgusted face, and stared out the window for a minute. What was taking Lucy so damned long?

She finally came back to the car, loaded down with packages, and said as she was getting in, "Well, this should hold us for a while. Did he give you any trouble, Michael?"

Shayne shook his head. "He's a good kid."

When they reached Lucy's apartment, she carried the baby in while Shayne unloaded the car, taking her purchases up the stairs carefully, his arms full. He had put the bassinet in the trunk of the car before leaving the office, and now he took it out and put it in Lucy's living room.

"I'll get on out of here," he said. "I told Tim I'd meet him for lunch. Don't let anybody in unless you know who it is."

"I know, Michael. Don't worry."

"You sure you and the kid'll be all right?"

"Positive," Lucy said. "When will you be back?"

Shayne shrugged. "That depends a lot on what Tim has to tell me. He was going to do some checking for me, and if he's come up with anything, I may have to go run it down. I should be back sometime before tonight, though."

"All right, Michael." Lucy came up on her toes for a moment and kissed him lightly. "We'll be looking forward to it."

SHAYNE WAS FROWNING AS HE LEFT THE APARTMENT. There was something about the look in Lucy's eyes . . . He was starting to wonder if leaving the kid with her was such a good idea after all. It might give her ideas.

Ideas of a different kind were what he needed. He needed something that might give him a lead on why the baby had been left at his door. He hoped that Tim had had some luck checking his contacts and his files.

As Shayne strolled into the Beef House, the eatery that he and Rourke frequented, a little later, he immediately spotted the lanky reporter in their usual booth. Rourke had a drink in front of him and a cigarette dangling from his lips. His suit was rumpled and looked slept in, as usual, but his dark eyes were alert and snapping.

"Mike! What gives, man? I'm ready for the story." Rourke's comments came quick and peppery as Shayne sat down and raised a finger to an approaching waiter. The waiter nodded and turned around, knowing Shayne's usual.

"Hold on a minute," Shayne said. "I thought you were supposed to be looking for information for me."

"Yeah, and I spent a lot of time this morning doing just that. Now, I'm not saying you should be grateful on that score alone, but you did call me in the middle of the night last night and accuse me of perpetrating some tasteless practical joke."

Shayne shrugged. "I'm sorry I woke you up. It's just that when I think of tasteless practical jokes . . ."

"Keep it up, you'll cut your own throat. Anyway, you asked me about kidnappings."

"Right." Shayne's drink arrived, a tumbler of Martell with ice water on the side. He sampled it approvingly, then went on, "Especially any kidnappings that have been very recent, maybe even going on right at this minute."

"Thinking that the kid you found at your door might be a kidnap victim. Do you have any reason to think that?"

"Nothing but a hunch. Something strange did happen this morning,

though. Lucy and I took the kid to the office, and a woman showed up there claiming to be the mother and wanting him back. Her story was just about as sincere as Peter Painter's smile, though, and when I called her on it, she pulled a gun and tried to take the kid that way."

Rourke let out a low whistle. "I hope you stopped her."

"Lucy did most of it," Shayne chuckled. "You should have seen her, Tim. She protected that kid like it was her own. She's going to have a bruise on her jaw where she took a punch."

"Interesting. I wonder who the woman was."

"Maybe we'll find out, if you'll ever get around to telling me what you found."

Rourke reached into a pocket and pulled out a sheaf of papers, clipped together. He said, "I couldn't dig up anything on a kidnapping investigation that's ongoing, but I found some stuff in the morgue about old cases. That's what was trying to jog my memory earlier. I made copies."

Shayne took the papers from Rourke and saw that they were all photocopies of newspaper clippings. All of the headlines had to do with kidnappings, and as Shayne scanned the dates, he saw that all the stories had appeared within the last two years.

"Five snatches in two years," Rourke said. "All very similar in their details, all ending up with the same results. The ransom was paid as instructed, but the victims were never recovered, either alive or dead."

"And all the victims were infants under two years old," Shayne said, his face grim. "All children of wealthy parents. How come there wasn't more mention of this in the press?"

Rourke sipped his drink and then shrugged. "You can see for yourself that all the cases were spread out, both in time and distance. Four of them happened here in Florida, one in Alabama, and always with several months in between."

"And an inside job in every case," Shayne said, studying the clippings. "Everytime, a nurse or housekeeper took a powder right afterwards. It looks like with this much to go on, the FBI would have been able to come up with something by now."

"If there's a ring behind it, it's a slick one. And you have to remember, it's possible that all of the cases are really unconnected, though I'll admit it looks otherwise. What do you think, Mike?"

Shayne considered for a moment, then said, "There are too many similarities. Everything tells me it's the work of an organized ring."

"I agree with you. And I've been thinking about something else, based on the fact that none of the victims were ever found."

"That the kidnappers are collecting the ransom money and then making some extra by selling the babies on the black market," Shayne guessed.

Rourke nodded. "Right the first time. Hell, Mike, it's common knowledge that there is a market for babies, no questions asked. And you can make a fortune at it, if you're unscrupulous enough."

The waiter appeared again, bearing huge plates loaded down with food. The steaks were excellent, as usual, Shayne found, but he didn't have much of an appetite. His mind was full of questions.

"This is all good stuff, Tim," he told the reporter, "but it still doesn't tell me anything about the kid I found. I think I'll go have a talk with Will Gentry."

"You won't be able to get anything more out of him than I did," Rourke replied. "If anything's going on, he's sitting down on it hard."

"Maybe I can pry him up. I knew him back when he was just the head of the detective bureau, rather than the chief of the whole blamed force."

"Yeah, but so did I. Good luck anyway."

Shayne nodded. "It won't hurt to have a look through the mug books, either, in case I might spot the woman who came to the office this morning. She handled that gun like she sort of knew what she was doing. She might have a record."

Shayne stood up and dropped money on the table. Rourke walked beside him out of the restaurant, saying, "I'll keep my eyes and ears open for anything that might help, Mike. But when am I going to get to meet this kid of yours?"

"He's not mine," Shayne said sharply. "And don't say anything like that around Lucy. She's feeling maternal enough already."

A wide grin stretched across Rourke's face. "Uh-oh. Sounds like you're afraid the lady is going to get ideas, pal. Good luck with that, too."

"I may need it," Shayne muttered.

HE AND ROURKE PARTED COMPANY when they reached their cars. Rourke headed back toward the offices of the *Daily News*, while Shayne pointed the nose of the Buick toward his apartment. It was on the way to Miami police headquarters, where he wanted to talk to Chief Will Gentry, and he thought he might as well stop by there and pick up the unopened cans of formula that Lucy had left there the night before. It didn't look like the baby was going to be back there anytime soon, and there was no point in letting the stuff go to waste.

As he drove, he considered what he had learned from his talk with Rourke. The photocopies of the news clippings were in his pocket, and he pulled them out as he thought. If there was indeed a kidnapping ring responsible for the five snatches covered in the clippings, then it was a particularly vicious racket. To steal a child and put its parents through hours and days of agonizing suffering, to demand and receive what added up to hundreds of thousands of dollars in ransom money, and then to fail to return the child, safe and sound . . . It was one of the worst, cruelest set-ups Shayne had ever run across, and he knew he would have to look into it for his own satisfaction, whether or not it had any connection with the present problem.

A kidnapping was the first thing that had come into his mind when he saw the child the night before, so pathetic in its little basket sitting in the hall outside his apartment. Whoever had gone to the trouble to put him there had known who occupied that apartment, and the odds were that they knew Shayne was a private detective, too. That meant some sort of caper was probably involved, and kidnapping was the most likely choice. If the woman who had come to the office and given her name as Roberta Hightower was involved some way in the theft of the child and had gotten cold feet, she might have taken it to a man she knew to be a detective. That made sense, all right.

Shayne felt a sudden twinge of guilt. If the kid had been stolen from its family, then the parents were probably going through hell right now. And he could well be prolonging that suffering by not going to the cops with the child. At the same time, though, he felt a compulsion to untangle this problem himself. It was funny, he thought, how wrapped up in something you could get just because you stumbled over a few pounds of trouble wrapped in a blue blanket.

He parked on the street close to his apartment and hurried upstairs, taking out his key for the door. As he inserted it and turned it in the lock, he grinned. He had seen the look the day man on the desk had given him. Jack, the night clerk, must have told his co-worker about how Mike Shayne, the hardbitten private eye who was always trading shots with thugs, had practically adopted some little baby that had been left at his door . . .

Shayne stepped into the apartment.

And stepped into darkness, as something smashed into the back of his head, sending him rocketing off on a fast trip to nowhere.

IV

THE PAIN IN HIS ARMS WAS THE FIRST THING Shayne was aware

of as he crawled wearily back into consciousness. They were pulled back at a sharp angle and tied behind him, putting an extremely uncomfortable strain on his shoulder sockets. There was a dull ache behind his eyes. He kept them closed for the moment, not wanting whoever had clouted him to know that he was awake again.

Shayne's breathing stayed regular as he sat in what felt like a straight chair from his kitchen. His head had drooped forward onto his chest, and it would have relieved some of the pain in his arms if he had sat up straighter, but that would also be a dead giveaway that he had come back to the land of the living. He listened intently for any noise that the intruder might make.

Harsh breathing came from somewhere nearby, and Shayne heard footsteps approaching. His charade of unconsciousness came to a sudden end. A man said, "Hell with this," and then cold water came splashing into his face.

Shayne gasped and shook his head, unable to control the reaction. He blinked his eyes open and looked up. The man standing in front of him holding a glass that had contained the water was big. That was Shayne's first impression of him, and a second look revealed just how broad his shoulders and torso were. As well as Shayne could judge from his seated position, the man wasn't very tall, but he made up for the lack of height with broadness.

"I didn't think you was ever going to wake up," the man rumbled, glaring down at Shayne. "You made me think I had hit you too hard."

Shayne's throat was dry, but he managed to croak, "That love tap? I've been hit harder, pal."

"I ain't your pal, shamus." The man grabbed Shayne's red hair and forced his head back. "I'm just a man who wants the answers to some questions."

"You've got a funny way of asking."

"How I ask 'em is my business. Now, where's the kid?"

Shayne grimaced as a fresh wave of pain washed through his head. When it had passed, he said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell. I know the kid was brought here last night, and I know it was at your office earlier today. But ain't nobody at the office now. So where's the kid?"

"Why don't you try the day care center down the street?"

The man let go of Shayne's hair, allowing the detective to let his head sag again. It felt good, but only for the second before the man's calloused hand cracked across Shayne's face roughly. His head was jerked to the side, and his cheek stung and throbbed where the power-

house backhand had landed.

"Smart answers ain't what I'm interested in, Shayne. You better think twice before giving me another one. Does that secretary of yours have the kid? What's her name, Shayne? Where does she live?"

Shayne wasn't about to answer those questions, and the man should have known that. Placing Lucy in danger, as well as the baby, was the last thing he was going to do, even if the man beat him half to death. Shayne tasted a drop of blood from the slap at the corner of his mouth. He licked it away, then said, "Where's Roberta Hightower, or whatever her name is? Shouldn't she be in on this?"

"I didn't tell you to ask the questions," the man grated. "You're supposed to answer them."

"Forget it."

"You don't seem to understand, Shayne. I can hurt you bad, and I'll do it if you don't cooperate."

"You'd better get at it, then," was all that Shayne said.

THE MAN MADE A FACE AND THEN HIT SHAYNE in the stomach, bending slightly so that he could bring around a swift, brutal blow. Shayne gasped and jerked forward against the cord binding him to the chair as the punch slammed into his belly. The room swam before his eyes for a moment before it settled back down to normal.

They were in the kitchen, Shayne tied to one of the straight chairs as he had surmised, and as the beating began in earnest, he started to concentrate on anything he could find to take his mind off the pain he was going through. He studied the pattern in the linoleum on the floor until it was etched into his brain, and then he shifted his attention to the curtains over the small window. Lucy had picked them out and put them up. Shayne had been with her when she selected them, but his mind hadn't really been on the chore at hand. Now he contemplated the curtains until he was sure he knew every tiny flower in their pattern. They were uncommonly pretty, he realized, just like the lady who had picked them out.

And all the while, the man's knobby fists were thudding into his face and body, cutting and bruising him, sending shock after painful shock through his rangy frame. Shayne kept the gasps and groans he felt buried deep inside him, though.

There was no doubt in his mind that this man was the one who had been behind the wheel of the car in which the phony Roberta Hightower had escaped. If his theory about the baby being a kidnapping victim was correct, then this big bruiser had to be one of the people in on the snatch. The woman had backed out of the job and tried to get the

baby back to its parents, but she had only had time to leave it off at Shayne's place. Why she had picked him was still unknown, but perhaps she had been pressed for time and been in the neighborhood to start with and had known that he was a detective. That theory worked, he thought, still trying to ignore the impact of the fists against him.

Finally, the man stepped back and regarded the bloody, battered detective in the chair and said, breathing hard, "Now, Shayne, are you ready to talk?"

Shayne was checking his teeth, pressing against them with his tongue. None of them seemed to be knocked loose. He said, "Go to hell," and spat blood on the floor.

The man snarled and stepped closer again. He pointed a finger at Shayne and threatened, "I'm just getting started, big man. I can make things a whole lot rougher on you. But all you have to do to avoid that is to tell me where the goddamn kid is."

A mental image of the baby, followed by thoughts of Lucy, went racing through Shayne's head. He swallowed and shook his head, and then he saw the fist coming at his face again.

He slid in and out of consciousness for a few minutes, aware of the burly man hitting him but hardly feeling the blows. When his head dropped forward again limply, the man stepped back and uttered a disgusted curse. Shayne sagged against his bindings, hoping that he would have a few minute's respite. He really wasn't as close to blacking out as he wanted the man to think he was.

But he wasn't that far away, either . . .

SHAYNE SAT THERE WHILE THE MAN PACED back and forth in front of him. The man was still cursing. Shayne kept his eyes closed, but he heard it when the man picked up the glass again and filled it with water at the sink. He stepped closer to the big detective, intending to dash the water full in his face again.

Shayne was as ready as he was going to be. He snapped his head up, eyes open now, and kicked backwards with one foot.

As the chair started to tip over, Shayne's other foot shot up and out, crashing into the man's groin. As his tormentor let out a shriek of pain, Shayne went over backwards in the chair. It hit the floor hard, with all of his considerable weight behind it.

Shayne felt the back of the chair crack, and he heaved on it as he started to roll over. Another crack rewarded his efforts, and then he felt the cords binding him slip free on one side. His right foot swept out as he rolled, catching the man behind the knee and knocking his feet out from under him.

As he came to his knees, Shayne rolled his shoulders again and pulled on the cords. The chair was broken into pieces now, and they came apart under the pressure Shayne applied. He twisted, bringing his freed arms around in front of him, the cords still tangled around his wrists. There were pieces of the chair back also caught in the cords, and larger pieces littered the kitchen floor..

The man was getting back up from where Shayne had knocked him down, and his face was twisted in a grimace of anger. He lunged toward the big redhead, arms outstretched.

Shayne threw himself to the side, his hands scrabbling on the floor for one of the larger pieces of the chair's wreckage. His fingers closed on one, and he whipped it around in a short arc. The piece of wood caught the man on the side of the head with a resounding thud and sent him plunging toward the floor.

Shayne was struggling to his feet again as the man rolled over, moaned, and got his hands under him again. He heaved himself up and was coming erect when Shayne brought the makeshift club down on his head again.

The man fell, but as he went down, a hand shot down and grabbed Shayne's ankle. He jerked as hard as he could, upsetting Shayne. Shayne slapped a hand down on the kitchen table, righting himself before his balance completely deserted him. The delay gave his opponent time to roll away across the kitchen, however.

As the man came to his feet, Shayne leaped toward him, the piece of chair leg upraised for another savage blow. The man's hand came out from under his coat holding a gun. He lashed out with it, even as Shayne tried to check his forward momentum, but it was too late. The gun cracked across Shayne's left wrist, sending pain shooting all the way up his arm and making the club fall from suddenly nerveless fingers.

The man turned the defensive move into an offensive one by slashing at Shayne's head with the gun in a backhanded blow. Shayne blocked it with his right forearm and tried to throw a punch at the man's belly with his left, but that arm refused to work. The man put a hand in Shayne's chest and shoved him away.

Shayne saw the man bringing the gun around toward a firing position now, and he dove forward, under the weapon, driving his head into the man's midsection. Both of them went backwards to crash into the counter. Shayne grappled for the gun with his good hand, but the man tore it free from his grip. He cut downwards with it again, and this time the barrel thudded into Shayne's head.

His thick, coarse hair cushioned the blow somewhat, but it still sent

Roman candles exploding in his head. His vision blurred as he wrapped his right arm around the man's waist and tried to throw him to the floor. They went across the room, feet sliding, breath rasping, in a desperate, deadly ballet.

Shayne's strength, fueled only by a surge of adrenaline, was wearing off now. He had endured too much during the beating to be able to withstand a long fight. His only chance had been to end the battle quickly, and it looked like that hope had disappeared. The man was wearing him down, and he had no doubt who the winner of the fracas would be in the end. He put all of his remaining strength into an uppercut that he launched from near the floor.

It might have done the trick if it had hit its target, the man's jaw. Instead, the man jerked his head back, and Shayne's fist only grazed his chin. The man hooked a punch into Shayne's stomach, bending the investigator over almost double, and then the pistol rose and fell once again.

It landed against Shayne's skull with what sounded like a tremendous explosion inside his head. He felt himself reeling, and then the kitchen floor was suddenly coming up to meet him, head on. He fell, sprawled loosely on the linoleum, fireworks still going off in his brain. Gradually, they faded away, but instead of the pyrotechnics display, all he saw was the night sky, as black as ink, with no stars to relieve the darkness now. He wasn't even aware of the man's footsteps as he walked quickly around the apartment.

He didn't even hear a gun go off a few minutes later

SHAYNE COULDN'T HAVE SAID HOW LONG he was stunned. All he knew for sure was that his head still hurt, and his nose was pressed against the floor in a very painful manner. He slowly raised his head and gingerly shook it from side to side, trying to clear away some of the cobwebs. He remembered getting hit before, as he came into the apartment the first time, and he had a vague, hellish memory of someone beating him and asking questions that he had refused to answer, and the fight came back to him. He was a little surprised that he was still alive, considering the fact that the man had had him lying there, helpless. He hadn't given away where the baby was, though, he was sure of that. The man wouldn't want him dead until he had the baby back.

Shayne put his hands underneath him and pushed upwards. It took him several minutes to reach his feet, and once there, it was all he could do for a time to just stand still, supporting himself on the counter. When he felt up to it, he got a glass and splashed Martell in

it, drinking the smooth liquor down in one gulp. Its warmth hit his stomach, sending a trace of strength back into his limbs.

Shayne walked unsteadily into the living room. He had taken two steps into the room when he stopped short, his fingers closing tighter on the glass he still carried. He looked at what was on the carpet of his living room and said softly, "Oh, hell. I should have figured"

The woman who had called herself Roberta Hightower and claimed to be the baby's mother was stretched out on the floor, a small bloody stain showing on her blouse, just under her left breast. Shayne didn't have to check her pulse to know she was dead, but he walked over to the body and did it anyway. Nothing.

He straightened up, staring at the gun on the floor beside the body. He had known it right away, as well he should have.

It was the one he kept in the night table, and he knew without sniffing the barrel that it had been fired recently

V

SHAYNE DIDN'T TOUCH THE BODY OR THE GUN YET. He walked back into the kitchen, put more cognac in the glass, and drank it down. The wheels of his brain were clicking over, trying to decide what his next move should be. He knew he didn't have much time to think it over.

The woman had been killed for at least two reasons, he thought. It was likely that she had double-crossed the man who had been waiting in the apartment to ambush Shayne when she deposited the baby there the night before. And by killing her here, with Shayne's own gun, and then leaving the body behind, the man was trying to tie a frame around Shayne's neck. He would have called the cops as soon as he got away from the building and tipped them off to the murder anonymously.

Shayne knew the frame wouldn't stick, even though his gun had been used in the shooting, but it would take laboratory tests to prove that he hadn't fired the fatal shot. That would take time, and during that time, he would be stuck at police headquarters. Even Will Gentry, under the circumstances, would have to order that Shayne be held for questioning.

And a delay like that was one thing Shayne couldn't afford.

As long as Lucy and the baby were back at her apartment, alone, while the killer was looking for them, Shayne couldn't let himself get tied up in clearing himself of a murder rap. He downed a third

drink and stalked back into the living room, avoiding looking at the dead woman.

He snatched up the phone and dialed quickly. Only one ring had gone by when Lucy's voice answered, and Shayne felt a surge of thankfulness go through him.

"Listen, Angel," he said quickly, "there's been some trouble. Don't interrupt just yet, there's not much time. The woman who came to the office this morning has been killed, and the body is here in my apartment. I'm sure the cops are on the way, and I'm taking off before they get here. The woman was killed by a big man, maybe five-ten but he must weigh two hundred and fifty; you can't miss him. Don't open your door to anybody but me, and if you see this guy, call the cops right away."

As he paused for breath, Lucy cut in, "Are you all right, Michael?"

"I'm fine, just roughed up a little bit. How about you and the kid?"

"Everything's all right here. Do you think that man will show up here?"

"I don't know. I don't think he knows where you live, but he was asking about you. He tried to get tough with me and make me tell him where the baby was. I think he was the dead woman's partner in a kidnapping scheme and that she crossed him by trying to give the kid back. I'll tell you all the details later, Angel. Right now I've got to move."

"What are you going to do, Michael?"

"Get the hell out of here, first. Remember what I told you, Angel." Shayne hung up before she could say anything else and wheeled around to face the corpse. He stepped over beside it and stooped to pick up the gun. Fingerprints weren't important now. The killer would have been careful not to leave any of his own, and Shayne's were already all over the weapon. He jammed it in his pocket.

Taking it with him would slow down the police investigation, but it wouldn't stop the eventual discovery of who the murder weapon belonged to. The results from test bullets fired from all of his guns were on file in the police labs, and the technicians would match them up with the death slug before much time had passed. Still, every minute on the loose might help.

He snagged his hat from the floor and put it on, wincing as it put pressure on his sore head. As he went toward the door, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and had to grin in shocked surprise as he saw his face covered with bruises and dried blood. He paused, rubbing his jaw, then hurried on out the door, shutting and locking it behind him.

The killer had planned on keeping him occupied with the police while the search went on for the baby. Shayne tugged gently on his earlobe as he rode down in the elevator. The man knew that Shayne had a secretary, figured that maybe that secretary was taking care of the baby now, but he had acted like he didn't know Lucy's name or where to find her. Shayne just hoped that the man wouldn't track her down before he had a chance to make some moves of his own.

He heard sirens coming closer to the building as he emerged onto the sidewalk. Passersby gave him startled glances as he hurried by, and he supposed he did look pretty striking, what with the battered features he was sporting. His Buick was still parked at the curb, and he slid behind the wheel and keyed the ignition quickly.

He had pulled away from the curb and was swinging around the corner into the next cross-street when he spotted the flashing red lights in his rearview mirror. They pulled up in front of the building, and Shayne caught a fleeting glimpse of uniformed officers charging out of the patrol car before the scene vanished from his line of sight. He smiled bleakly and pressed down on the accelerator. That had been cutting it close. He was glad he hadn't been knocked out for ten more minutes.

SHAYNE NAVIGATED THROUGH THE AFTERNOON TRAFFIC of Miami for several minutes, cutting over to Biscayne Boulevard and following it to the County Causeway. The sun was sparkling on Biscayne Bay as he crossed it to Miami Beach. He had considered his options and decided that Tim Rourke's apartment near Flamingo Park might be the best place for him to spend the next few minutes. Once the cops discovered the dead woman in his apartment, they would put out an alarm for him. Going to Lucy's apartment was out; that was one of the first places they would look. It wouldn't hurt, though, for cops to be hanging around the place. Their presence might discourage the killer if he should happen to discover Lucy's name and address.

Rourke's place, on the other hand, would probably be deserted at this time of day, and Shayne had a key to it. Getting across the bay, into the jurisdiction of Peter Painter's force, would help slow things down, too. Shayne knew he couldn't count on much of a grace period, though. He was one of Painter's least-favorite people, and once the Miami Beach chief knew that Shayne was wanted for questioning in a murder across the bay, he would spare no effort in trying to locate his long-time antagonist.

Shayne parked in an alley behind the slightly-disreputable building

where Rourke lived and hurried up a flight of service stairs to the apartment. The lock on the door opened to his key, and he stepped into the grab bag of disorganized clutter that Rourke called home. Shayne shut the door softly behind him and threw the latch over.

Stepping around piles of dirty clothes and discarded pages covered with typing, Shayne went into the kitchen and found a dusty glass in the cabinet. He rinsed it out in the sink, uncorked a bottle of the cheap rye that Rourke favored, and poured out several fingers of the fiery stuff. Carrying the drink back into the living room, he pushed a stack of books off a chair and sat down to light a cigarette. He had already spotted the telephone resting on the floor beside the chair, under an opened magazine.

When Shayne had his cigarette going and had taken a sip of the rye, he reached down and picked up the phone, putting the instrument in his lap. He dialed the number of the phone in Rourke's cubicle just off the City Room of the *Daily News*.

When the reporter answered in a harried voice, Shayne said, "Hello, Tim. Don't say my name out loud."

Rourke restrained the exclamation that had leapt to his lips and settled for a low-voiced question. "Where the hell are you? I just heard about —"

"I know, you just heard about the stiff in my apartment and that the cops want me for questioning. Right?"

"Yeah, right. So give. What's the story?"

"Well, for one thing," Shayne grinned, "you're harboring a fugitive at this very moment."

He heard Rourke choking and spluttering for a minute, and then the reporter said, "I hope . . . Lord, I hope . . . that you're joking."

"No, I'm sitting right here in your humble castle, drinking your booze and wondering if you ever clean this place up. Listen, Tim, I need a place to lie low for a while. If you want me out, just say the word, though."

There were a few seconds of silence, then Rourke said grudgingly, "No, I guess it's all right. But you're going to owe me an exclusive on this one."

"You've got it. And if you want to get the story that much quicker, there's something else you can do for me."

Rourke sighed. "Yeah?"

Shayne took another drink of the rye and grimaced. "Besides buying a better brand of booze in the future, you can try to find out just who that woman was who got knocked off in my place. I know she came to the office this morning and tried to get the baby back by claiming to

be its mother, but she gave a phony name and told a story that even an infant would have seen through. So find out who and what she was, okay?"

"I'll give it a try," Rourke promised. "I was just about to give Will a call anyway. I'll see what I can pry out of him."

"I never got a chance to talk to him myself. I ran into the trouble first." An idea was growing in Shayne's head. He went on, "If you do find out who the woman was, check her movements over the last couple of years, too."

Rourke was silent for a moment, then said, "I think I see what you're getting at. I'll call you back."

"Thanks, Tim." Shayne cradled the phone and put it back on the floor.

THE TIME SPENT WAITING FOR ROURKE TO CALL BACK went by slowly. Shayne thought about calling Lucy again, decided not to because of the chance that the cops would be there questioning her concerning his whereabouts. A call from him while they were there would just give them more leverage to use against Lucy.

When the phone finally rang, Shayne snatched it up and held it to his ear, grunting, "Yeah?"

"I've got what you wanted," Rourke said. "Her name was Mary Lerner, and she was a nurse. Worked in pediatrics for several years at a hospital here in Miami, then quit to become a private nurse, she told her co-workers. That was a little over two years ago." Rourke paused significantly, then went on, "After that, info on her is kind of sketchy. She seems to have moved around a lot. The addresses I've been able to come up with, though, are all fairly close to the locations where those unsolved kidnapping cases took place."

"And bingo," Shayne said. "That ties most of it up, Tim. The ring hires her to take care of the kids after they snatch them, and after a couple of years she gets sick of it. They're probably keeping a pretty close eye on her, and she doesn't ever get a chance to take the current victim back to its parents or the cops. When she does run out on them, she manages to leave the kid on my doorstep, though. The others catch up to her and tell her that she'd better get the kid back if she wants to stay alive, so she tries that stunt in the office this morning. When it doesn't work, they decide one chance was enough. She was as good as dead when she left the office without the kid."

"Nobody knows you've got the brat, though," Rourke cut in. "They can still get the ransom money out of the parents, in all likelihood. Why all the uproar trying to get the kid back from you?"

"I think your theory was right," Shayne said. "They've been selling the babies all along. They don't want to lose out on that money, too, and they're not ready to write it off. They would have had to kill the woman anyway, since she had turned on them. Doing it the way they did, they hoped to land me in jail while they track down Lucy and the kid. They know now it wasn't at the office or in my apartment."

"Then, dammit, Lucy's in danger — "

"I know," Shayne said, his voice tight and grim. "But about all I can do under the circumstances is try to round up the rest of the gang before they can get to her. Thanks, Tim. I've got to get moving again, as soon as I've made one more phone call."

"Remember, you owe me the rest of the st — " Shayne hung up before Rourke could finish the sentence, and as soon as he had a dial tone again, was calling another familiar number.

WILL GENTRY'S PRIVATE LINE BYPASSED THE SWITCHBOARD at Miami police headquarters, so it was the beefy chief's voice that Shayne heard as the ringing was answered. Shayne said, "It's me, Will. Don't try to trace it."

"Mike! Dammit, man, where are you?"

"Sorry, Will. Can't tell you that, but you know damn well I didn't plug that woman in my apartment."

"Then come in, and we'll prove it," Gentry barked. "I can't just take your word for it, no matter how long we've been friends."

"You've taken my word before," Shayne said quietly. "I may have shaded the truth, Will, but I've never out-and-out lied to you, and I've delivered plenty of killers to you. I can do it again if you'll give me a chance."

Shayne could almost see Gentry fuming as nothing came over the wire for a moment. Then, the chief said, "What is it you want, Mike?"

"A little time," Shayne said, heaving an inner sigh of relief. "And the answer to a question. Are your men working on a kidnapping at the moment that you haven't made public? One involving an infant?"

"Blast it, Mike, I can't give out information like that!"

"It's important, Will."

Again there was silence on the line. And then Gentry said, "Some people named Ashe. Young couple with one child, a boy about six months old. The kid was grabbed a couple of days ago. The ransom note demanded a hundred grand. Ashe can afford it, he's some kind of hotshot engineer with a big electronics firm, so they've decided to pay off the kidnappers. And they told us in no uncertain terms to stay

out of it. They want the baby back more than they want the kidnappers caught."

"Are you going along with them?" Shayne asked.

"They're determined. And their lawyer had promised a lawsuit if we interfere against the parents' wishes. I don't like it, but these folks have clout. I've got my orders, from the mayor and the police commissioner, too, to lay off."

"Damned foolish of them," Shayne muttered. "They would have never seen that baby again."

"Mike, whatever you know about this, you'd better tell me." Gentry's voice was low and ominous.

"With any luck, I can put the whole thing on your desk before midnight and solve some other cases at the same time," Shayne said. "Do you know when the payoff is set for?"

"I saw the ransom note before the Ashes all but kicked us off the case. The money is supposed to be delivered late this afternoon, tossed out of a car on the highway exactly fifteen miles south of the Ashes' house. I think the lawyer, a guy named Sorell, is going to handle it."

"What's he look like?" Shayne asked quickly.

"Handsome guy, older than he looks except for his hair and moustache. They're silver. Arrogant bastard, but he's looking out for the Ashes and what they want like a bulldog."

Shayne had the telephone directory in his lap as he talked, glad for the moment that Rourke threw things down wherever he was when he was through with them. The directory had been on the floor beside the chair, too. Shayne found an address for the Ashes, called it out to Gentry, and listened to the chief confirm it.

"You're not planning to tail Sorell and try to nail whoever picks up the ransom money, are you, Mike?" Gentry asked, after a moment.

"You said they didn't want any interference, Will," Shayne replied. "What makes you think I'd do a thing like that?"

Gentry chuckled, the first sign of humor Shayne had heard from him during this tense conversation. "No, you'd never play it fast and loose like that, would you, Mike? Running around trying to catch some kidnappers while every cop in the city is looking for you on suspicion of murder?" He paused. "Dammit, you'd better know what you're doing, Mike."

Shayne grinned and hung up, tossing down the last of his drink. He knew that Gentry was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, for a little while, at least, and now he had to make the most of the chance he had.

Two minutes later, he was out of Rourke's apartment and on the streets again, pushing the Buick toward the home of two very desperate people . . . desperate for the safe return of something very precious to them . . .

VI

THE NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE THE ASHES LIVED was a fairly exclusive residential district. None of the large houses behind well-kept lawns were worth less than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and most of them were worth more than that. Shayne found the address he was looking for fairly quickly. He drove on past, noting the three expensive cars in the driveway, and parked two blocks away, in the lot of a small shopping center. He could see the Ashe house plainly from this spot. He settled back in his seat, lighting a cigarette, and then reached under the front seat to come up with a pair of high-powered binoculars in a leather case. He took the glasses and put them on the seat next to him, where he could reach them in a hurry.

Gentry had said that the ransom delivery was set for late in the afternoon, but he hadn't specified any particular time. Shayne glanced at his watch. It was a little after four o'clock now.

He sat there, smoking and fidgeting, for nearly an hour. The sun was starting its downward slide behind him when the front door of the house he was watching finally opened. A man came out, walked toward one of the cars.

Shayne had the binoculars in his hands in a second, had his eyes pressed to the lenses. As he studied the man, well-dressed in a suit that looked quite costly, and saw the silvery hair and moustache, Shayne felt no doubt that this was Sorell, the lawyer for the Ashes who was handling the payoff. There was a briefcase in his hand, and Shayne was willing to bet that there was a hundred grand in it.

Sorell got into a powder blue Mercedes and backed out of the driveway carefully. By the time he was on the street, Shayne had the engine of the Buick going and was ready to slip it into gear. Sorell drove past the shopping center where Shayne was parked, looking straight ahead. The big detective let him get a lead of a block or so, then fell in behind him.

Tailing the man was no problem. Shayne had checked his odometer, and he knew that Sorell was supposed to toss the money out exactly fifteen miles south of the Ashe house. If his memory was correct, that was an undeveloped area where the kidnappers would have little

trouble picking up the money. There wasn't much around except fields full of marsh grass; a few side roads leading to the ocean cut across the highway.

Since he knew where Sorell was going, Shayne stayed well behind him. It was easy to spot the blue Mercedes, and he kept it in view all the time. He figured that Sorell was about half a mile ahead of him, so when he had come fourteen and a quarter miles from the Ashes, he pulled over to the side of the road and put the glasses on Sorell again.

Traffic was light. The highway was two lanes here, and Shayne assumed that the lawyer would swerve over into the other lane for a moment to toss the briefcase out, so that it would be sure to clear the shoulder on the other side of the road. But as he watched, Shayne saw that the blue car continued in a straight line. Shayne trained the binoculars on the window on the driver's side, watching keenly for Sorell to make any movement.

The lawyer drove on. The briefcase stayed in the Mercedes.

Shayne frowned, put the binoculars down beside him again, and slipped the Buick into gear. His foot came down hard on the accelerator.

As the Buick surged back out onto the highway, its powerful engine humming, Shayne kept one hand on the wheel and used the other to worry at his earlobe. He watched the odometer, noted the place where Sorell should have delivered the money. The briefcase was nowhere to be seen alongside the road, though. Shayne's eyes hadn't deceived him; Sorell hadn't made the payoff.

THAT PUT A WHOLE NEW TWIST ON THINGS. For some reason, Sorell wasn't following the instructions of the kidnappers. It could be that the Ashes had decided not to pay them off after all

Or it could be that the payoff had already been made, without the Ashes really being aware of it. Shayne's brow corrugated in a frown.

There was one thing he hadn't fully considered in his thinking on the kidnapping ring. They would need a lawyer as part of the gang, in order to handle the selling of the stolen babies after the ransoms had been paid. Shayne knew that couples who resorted to the black market in their desire to obtain a child often had to rationalize things for themselves by thinking of it as an "adoption." The presence of an attorney handling things made it all seem that much more legitimate.

But if Sorell was the Ashes' lawyer, would he dare to assist in the kidnapping of their child? Shayne gave a mental shrug. It might be a chance worth taking, in Sorell's mind. He would certainly be an

unlikely suspect, under normal circumstances. With no police surveillance of the payoff, he could claim to have delivered the money as ordered, and no one would be any the wiser. It was a sweet set-up, Shayne saw, if his guesses were correct.

There was one way to find out.

He could still see the blue Mercedes up ahead. It had more of a lead now, since Shayne had paused to watch the payoff that had never materialized, but he was having no trouble keeping it in sight. He saw Sorell turn left on one of the side roads, toward the ocean, and he took the turn himself when he reached it.

Shayne had to go more slowly now. After a mile or so, the blacktop road became a dirt one. The beach was only a half mile or so away now. Shayne pulled over carefully, taking pains not to get the car into soft sand, and killed the engine.

It was quiet out here, he found as he got out. He could hear traffic passing back up on the highway, but here on this side road, there were no noises except the lapping of the waves up ahead and the cries of sea birds circling overhead.

Shayne walked down the road, keeping to the side where he could duck into the tall grass if need be. The road curved around to the left, and as he rounded the curve, he saw the ramshackle beach house up ahead at the edge of the sand. The blue Mercedes was parked beside it, along with the dark sedan that Shayne had seen Mary Lerner escape in that morning.

The approach of the road was too wide-open. Shayne cut across the field, his feet sinking into the sand as he made his way through the grass. He had to move slowly in order not to create too much of a ripple in the grass. The wind was blowing it some, but he didn't want anyone spotting him if they happened to be looking this way from the beach house.

He had cover until he reached a spot twenty yards from the house. Kneeling in the grass, Shayne studied the place and saw no movement in any of the windows. He would have to take a chance. Coming up out of his crouch, he sprinted across the open space toward the house.

NO CRY OF ALARM CAME TO HIS EARS AS HE STRUGGLED to run through the shifting sand. The house was set up on pillars, with an open space of about five feet underneath it, and when he got close enough, Shayne dove for that open area. He crawled quickly on hands and knees under the house.

Lying still on the sand, Shayne listened intently. He could dimly

make out voices over his head, but he couldn't understand any of the words. He made his way toward the ocean side of the house, crawling over the moist sand.

There were no other houses in sight up and down the beach, and Shayne guessed that someone had built this one as a retirement spot, twenty or thirty years earlier. It had gone downhill since then, though, until it looked like it was about ready to fall down. He just hoped it waited until he was out from under it before it decided to collapse.

There was a small verandah facing the ocean, and as Shayne crawled up under it, he heard the voices more plainly. A board creaked over his head. The men were standing out there, talking.

"It sure is pretty," a voice said. "I never get tired of looking at money."

Shayne knew that voice. The last time he had heard it, its owner had been threatening him and trying to find out where the baby was. It was the voice of the man who had killed the nurse, Mary Lerner.

"Well, with any luck, there'll be more of it for you to look at later," another voice replied. This one was another, more cultured. It had to belong to Sorell. "I've finally found out where that brat has to be."

Shayne tensed in his hiding place. The brutal killer asked, "You found out where Shayne's secretary lives?"

"Yes.." Sorell gave the address of Lucy's apartment, then said, "Her name is Lucy Hamilton. She's the only one left, and she has to have the baby. I know Shayne didn't turn it over to the juvenile authorities. I would have heard about that from my contacts in the department."

"So now I go get the kid and take off, right?"

"That's right, Reuben. You can go to our place in Mobile and wait for me to contact you. I'm working on a couple in Tallahassee that I think will be wanting to use our adoption service. Of course, you'll have to find a new nurse to care for the child while you're there. I hope the next one turns out to be more trustworthy than poor Mary."

"That bitch!" the man called Reuben spat. "She picked a fine time to get religion, right in the middle of the last job before we call it quits. I never should have let her out of my sight with that kid."

"I never thought she'd run to Mike Shayne with him, though."

Reuben snorted. "She'd been reading about him in the paper. He's been in on a lot of big cases lately. I guess that stuck in her mind when she saw I was going to catch her before she got the kid home."

"I'm sure Shayne wishes now that he had never seen that baby. He'll have a great deal of explaining to do, once the police catch up to him."

Maybe not, Shayne thought grimly from his position under their feet. Maybe the ones with the explaining to do would be a lawyer named Sorell and a tough named Reuben.

Shayne heard ice clinking in a glass, then Reuben said, "I'd better get moving, if I'm going back to Miami to grab the kid away from Shayne's secretary. Take good care of that money, Sorell."

"I've never let you down yet, have I?"

"No, and there had better not be a first time."

There was an edge of anger in Sorell's voice as he replied, "I'd think you would trust me by now, Reuben. After all, I'm the one who came up with the whole idea in the first place."

"I'll give you that," Reuben grunted.

SHAYNE WAS GOING TO GIVE THEM SOMETHING ELSE. He had his gun out now and was edging toward the sunlight. He heard Sorell and Reuben walk back into the house, going toward the inland side. Rolling out from under the dilapidated structure, Shayne came to his feet and stepped around the corner just as the two men emerged from the house.

"Freeze!" Shayne barked. "Hold it right there!"

They whirled toward him, Sorell's mouth dropping open as he gasped, "Shayne!" The big man called Reuben reacted differently, though. He threw himself to the side, away from Sorell, and his hand dove under his jacket.

Shayne tracked Reuben with his pistol and squeezed off a shot that kicked up dirt next to the rolling figure. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Sorell running toward the Mercedes.

Reuben came up holding a .38. He snapped off a shot that went wild. Shayne fired again, the bullet whipping past Reuben's head as the man ducked around the far corner of the house.

Shayne had known when Reuben threw himself away from Sorell that he couldn't cover both men at the same time anymore. It was a good move, another indication that Reuben was a pro, and Shayne had concentrated on him as the most dangerous of the duo. But he was keeping an eye on Sorell, too, and he saw the lawyer reach into the Mercedes and come out with a small automatic.

Shayne jerked back behind one of the pillars on which the house was sitting as Sorell opened up on him. Slugs cut the air around him, coming from two directions at once now. Splinters flew from the pillar he was using as cover as bullets chewed it up.

He hadn't reckoned on getting caught in a crossfire. He leaped to the side, looking for better cover, and felt something tug at his sleeve

as he jumped. He triggered off two more shots even as he moved, sending Reuben scurrying for more protection himself.

Shayne heard the engine of the Mercedes catch and leap into life. Sorell was getting out while the getting was good. Shayne dove onto the sand, rolling and firing toward the tires of the expensive car. None of the bullets hit home.

There were only a couple of shots left in his gun, Shayne knew, three at most, and then he would be defenseless. Reuben wouldn't give him time to reload, that was for sure. And the man was between him and the Buick. Shayne cast a glance at the rolling dunes of sand down the beach. It looked like it was time for a defensive maneuver.

He fired once more, drawing a yelp from Reuben, but he didn't know if it was a cry of pain or surprise. And he didn't wait to find out. Shayne ran for the dunes, bounding through the sand as fast as he could, and as he ran, he saw spurts of sand around him from the shots Reuben was firing.

The shots let up, and Shayne knew that the other man had run out of bullets and was having to reload. He threw himself behind one of the dunes and did the same thing. As he rolled back over and snatched a glance over the top of the dune, he saw Reuben running after him. The gun in the man's hand exploded again, and Shayne ducked back as the slug whistled overhead.

For a few minutes, it was cat-and-mouse there among the sand dunes, as Shayne and Reuben each tried to get the drop on the other. Shayne took several shots at his opponent when Reuben would show himself, and he had to dodge several bullets himself.

There was a clump of saw grass that Shayne was working his way toward slowly, and he was almost there when he heard harsh breathing almost right over his head. Reuben came over the top of the dune next to him, lunging with arms outstretched, his face contorted in a snarl. The two big men crashed together, falling to the sand heavily.

Shayne felt his pistol slip away. He saw Reuben's gun flashing toward his face, and he jerked his head to the side desperately. The gun hit the sand instead. Shayne drove a fist upwards, feeling the impact all the way up his arm as the blow smashed into Reuben's jaw.

The man went off him sideways, and Shayne rolled away, coming up swinging a roundhouse right that slammed into the off-balance Reuben and knocked him backwards a good four feet. But Shayne saw then that it had been a mistake. Reuben snapped the barrel of his gun up now that the quarters weren't so close, and Shayne had to check a lunge in mid-stride.

"Hold it, Shayne!" Reuben cracked. He scurried backwards a little further as he covered Shayne, then stood up. Breathing hard, he said, "You're one tough son of a bitch, you know that? But I've still got my gun, and you don't, so it's all over."

SHAYNE STOOD STILL, FISTS STILL BALLED at his sides. He grated, "You've got the ransom money. Why don't you just let the kid go?"

"You've got to be joking. That kid is worth at least another thirty or forty thousand on the black market, and we're not going to pass up that kind of dough. Sorell's not stupid, Shayne, and neither am I. I'm going to blow you away, then its back to Miami to grab that brat again. And you know what? I hope that secretary of yours puts up a fight when I try to take him. I'd like that."

Shayne felt a wave of ice cold anger go over him as he looked at the leer on Reuben's face. He said, "If you're going to blow me away, you'll have to use another gun to do it. You plugged the barrel of that one with sand during the fight."

Reuben laughed. "Hell, Shayne, you know I'm not going to fall for that. Next you'll be telling me to look out behind me."

Shayne shrugged, the beginnings of a grin on his battered face. "Look at the sand on the outside of the barrel if you don't believe me. You fire that thing and it's going to blow up in your face. I think I'd like to see that, so go right ahead."

"You bastard. I'm not buying it." The gun came up, and Shayne saw Reuben's finger start to tighten on the trigger. But before he fired, he tilted the barrel just a bit, trying to get a look in the end of it before he squeezed off the shot. Shayne's grin had been just a touch too confident....

Shayne threw himself across the space between them. Reuben jerked the trigger, and the gun blasted next to Shayne's ear, sending the slug screaming off harmlessly. Shayne was deafened by the explosion of the shot, but he didn't need to hear for what he did next.

He was still seeing the leer on Reuben's face in his mind as he swept the gun aside and drove his fists into the man's stomach. Threatening Lucy had been exactly the wrong thing for the kidnapper to do. Shayne pounded him, forcing him back against the dune, slamming piledriver blows to his belly until Reuben was doubled over with the pain. Shayne's knee came up then, smashing into Reuben's face and turning his nose to pulp. As the blow straightened the man up, Shayne put everything he had left into a long looping punch.

It lifted Reuben off his feet and broke his jaw in three places. He

landed on his shoulders and head and then lay completely still. Shayne stood over him, gasping for breath, holding his throbbing right hand with his left. He didn't think he had broken any bones in his hand, but even if he had, it would have been worth it.

Shayne looked down at the killer and kidnapper, and he grinned. It was time to wrap this thing up, just like he had promised Will Gentry.

VII

"ROBERT . . . DIANA . . . YOU KNOW HOW SORRY I AM about all this," Eric Sorell said. "All we can do now is wait and see if the kidnappers keep their part of the bargain."

The young couple sitting on the sofa in the living room of the elegant house both looked tense and grief-stricken. The man held his wife's hands tightly. Her head was against his shoulder, and sobs ran through her slender frame. The atmosphere of expectancy and sorrow that charged the room had been constantly with them from that awful moment when they had discovered that their baby was gone.

"Thank you, Eric," Robert Ashe said softly. "Di and I know you've done all you could."

Sorell stood up and crossed the room to a window, his steps making no sound on the thick carpet. As he looked out at the Miami dusk, a worried frown creased his smooth face. He looked at the digital watch on his wrist, and the frown deepened.

"They've had time to pick up the money and get back to a phone," he said, almost to himself. "They should have called by now."

Diana Ashe's sobs increased, despite her efforts to muffle them. Sorell cast a glance back over his shoulder and raised one eyebrow. Neither of his clients saw the look.

A maid appeared in the door of the living room and asked, "Can I get you anything, Mrs. Ashe?"

Robert Ashe answered for his wife. "No, Phoebe, thank you. Right now, we just want to be left alone."

The woman looked almost as upset as the Ashes. Sorell watched her closely as she said, "Yes, sir. Just call if there's anything I can do —"

She broke off, and everyone looked up sharply, as the sound of a slamming door came from the rear of the house. The maid started to turn around, then suddenly took a step backwards, bringing her all the way into the living room. Her gaze was riveted down the hall. Sorell started toward her as Robert Ashe stood up suddenly, his distraught wife clutching at his arm. Sorell snapped, "What is it, Phoebe?"

The maid didn't have a chance to speak before Sorell got his answer

in person, Michael Shayne stepped into the doorway, his bruised face grim, the gun in his hand steady as a rock, and said, "Everybody stay still."

SORELL'S TONGUE CAME OUT AND FLICKED over suddenly dry lips. The maid had her hands clasped anxiously, and Robert Ashe looked completely startled and confused. Diana Ashe uttered an inarticulate cry when she saw the gun and cringed back against the sofa.

"You're one of them," Ashe said in a voice that was almost a whisper. "You're one of the bastards who stole our baby!"

"You can't get away with this," Sorell barked at Shayne. "Haven't you caused these people enough anguish — "

"Shut up, Sorell." Shayne's voice was deadly, and the gun shifted to point more in the lawyer's direction. He kept his eyes on Sorell, but his next words were directed to the Ashes. "I think I've got something here that belongs to you. Lucy . . . "

Lucy Hamilton appeared behind Shayne, stepping around him carefully so as not to get into the line of fire, and she was carrying a small, blanket-wrapped bundle . . .

"Michael!"

The cry came from Diana Ashe, as she came up off the sofa. She dashed forward, her husband right behind her, and tears of joy were coursing down her face as she took the baby from Lucy. She said over and over, "Oh, Michael, Michael . . . "

A broad grin broke over Shayne's face, and he glanced at Lucy to see the same thing happening to her. They hadn't known the kid's name until now.

Sorell began, "See here, I don't know what this is all about — "

"The hell you don't," Shayne snapped, his face becoming serious again. "Your kidnapping ring is busted all to pieces, Sorell. You won't ever pull a stunt like this again."

Ashe was looking at his child in amazement at the baby's unexpected return, but he glanced up now and said, "What's he talking about, Eric? It sounds like he's accusing you of being in on the kidnapping."

"That's ridiculous, Robert — "

"It's the truth, Ashe," Shayne cut in. "You don't know me, but my name is Mike Shayne. I'm a private detective, and since last night, I've been looking after your little boy here. Sorry I didn't get him home sooner, but for most of the time, I didn't know who he was."

Diana Ashe said, "We're just so thankful to have him back, I don't care about any of the other."

Lucy stepped over beside her and spoke softly, reassuring her that the baby was just fine, as Shayne leveled his gaze on Sorell again and asked, "Where's the money, Sorell? Still outside in your car?"

Sorell looked furious and said, "I'm calling the police. You can't come in here and make wild accusations and get these people all upset?"

"They don't look so upset to me anymore. You go right ahead and call the police. They're having a nice chat with your friend Reuben right about now."

"Who's Reuben?" Ashe asked.

"Sorell's partner in the snatch," Shayne answered. "They've pulled the same thing before, collecting ransom on stolen babies and then selling them on the black market. They were about to call the racket quits, though, so they picked on you, some of Sorell's own clients, for one last big score."

"Ridiculous," Sorell snapped.

Shayne ignored him. "I imagine that your maid here was in on the plan, too. That would fit the pattern in all the other cases. Reuben's singing a pretty song all about it." He looked over at the maid. "You'd better come clean, too, lady. It won't go near as hard for you that way."

"Don't say a word, Phoebe," Sorell ordered. "I'm going to ruin you for this, Shayne."

"You're not going to be ruining anybody. You see, Reuben's claiming that *you* killed Mary Lerner, not him."

"That's a lie!" Sorell exploded. "That was all his idea, not mi — " He stopped short. Slowly, an admiring look stole over his face. He went on after a moment, "That was neat, Shayne. But the word of a murderer isn't going to be enough to prove anything against me."

"Then I'll tell what I know," Phoebe exclaimed. "I'll tell the police the truth, that it was all *your* idea, Mr. Sorell. I didn't know you were going to hurt Mr. and Mrs. Ashe like that, though. I didn't know that poor Mary would be killed!"

"Shut up!" Sorell shouted. "Shut up! It's all lies — "

Shayne was smiling again. "It's over, Sorell."

The attorney looked haggard now. His veneer of sophistication was gone. He walked jerkily over toward the window again. Ashe watched him with growing revulsion and rage. He suddenly took a step toward Sorell, his fists clenching —

And put himself right in Shayne's line of fire.

SORELL SAW THE OPPORTUNITY AND SEIZED IT. He lunged forward, shoving Ashe out of his way and toward Shayne. The big detective barked, "Dammit!" and tried to dodge around Ashe.

Sorell was halfway to the door now, and he had snatched a small pistol from under his coat. Shayne saw fleetingly that it was the same one the lawyer had used at the beach house. He started to bring his own pistol up as Sorell spun around in the doorway.

"Don't try it, Shayne!" Sorell cried. Shayne's finger was ready to squeeze the trigger, but he checked his motion. Sorell went on, "You don't want a lot of shooting in here where the baby is, do you, Shayne? Not after you've gone to so much trouble for it?"

Shayne's eyes flicked around the room as he stood tensely, pistol extended. The Ashes were standing together again, the baby in Diana Ashe's arms, and Lucy was beside them. The maid, Phoebe, had shrunk back into a corner, her face covered with fear, stunned by the sudden threat of violence. And Sorell was crouched in the doorway. Shayne took a deep breath and said, "Looks like a stand-off, Sorell, What's the next move?"

"The next move is you drop the gun and I get out of here," Sorell said. "There's enough money hidden away that I can get away and start a whole new life somewhere."

"No." Diana Ashe's voice cracked across the room. Shayne glanced back at her. She and her husband had drawn closer together, and Diana had turned her body at an angle. "I'll protect Michael, Mr. Shayne. Just don't let that . . . monster get away."

Shayne grinned again and looked at Sorell. "How about it?" he asked. "You might get one shot off, Sorell, but one bullet from that popgun won't stop me. There'll be five slugs in you before you hit the floor."

Sorell stared at them, sweat beading his face. He stood there for a long moment, seeing the determination on the faces of the people in the room . . . and seeing the smile on Shayne's face, the eager smile . . .

The little automatic made hardly any sound at all when it hit the thick carpet.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR THE COPS TO GET THERE, but it took a while for Shayne to explain everything to them. He told the story several times, the last time to Will Gentry himself, who gave him a stern lecture for not turning the baby in to the authorities as soon as he found it and for concealing evidence in the murder. Then Gentry slapped him on the back and said, "Good job, Mike, even if you did play it

pretty wild. You don't always have to be such a damn lone wolf, you know."

"I suppose Reuben is still spilling his guts out, trying to save himself from a murder rap?"

"Yeah, but he won't be able to do it. One good thing. He told us where to find Sorell's records. We'll be able to track down those other babies they sold and get them back to their parents. Their real parents, that is. That's going to be a sticky mess."

"I'm glad you get to deal with it, not me. Is it all right if I get out of here now?"

"Sure. You and Lucy can come down later and sign your statements. You in a hurry to get somewhere?"

Shayne chuckled. "Will . . . I haven't had a lick of sleep since that baby started crying outside my door last night."

Shayne had to find the nursery to locate Lucy. She was there with the Ashes, the three of them watching the baby sleep, undisturbed by all that had happened around him the last couple of days. Shayne stepped up beside the crib, slid an arm around Lucy's waist, and looked down at the kid himself. Funny think; he noticed that little Michael had reached up in his slumber and grasped his tiny little earlobe . . .

Diana Ashe whispered, "I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Shayne —"

"Then don't. We were glad to help." And right at the moment, the sight of the reunited family meant more to Shayne than the generous check that Robert Ashe had slipped him earlier.

He steered Lucy out of the nursery and then out of the house, and they returned to the Buick, still where Shayne had parked it on the next street over so that they could slip up on the Ashe house. Shayne stretched wearily before he got into the car and said, "Well, Angel, I hope I never get woke up in the middle of the night by a crying baby again."

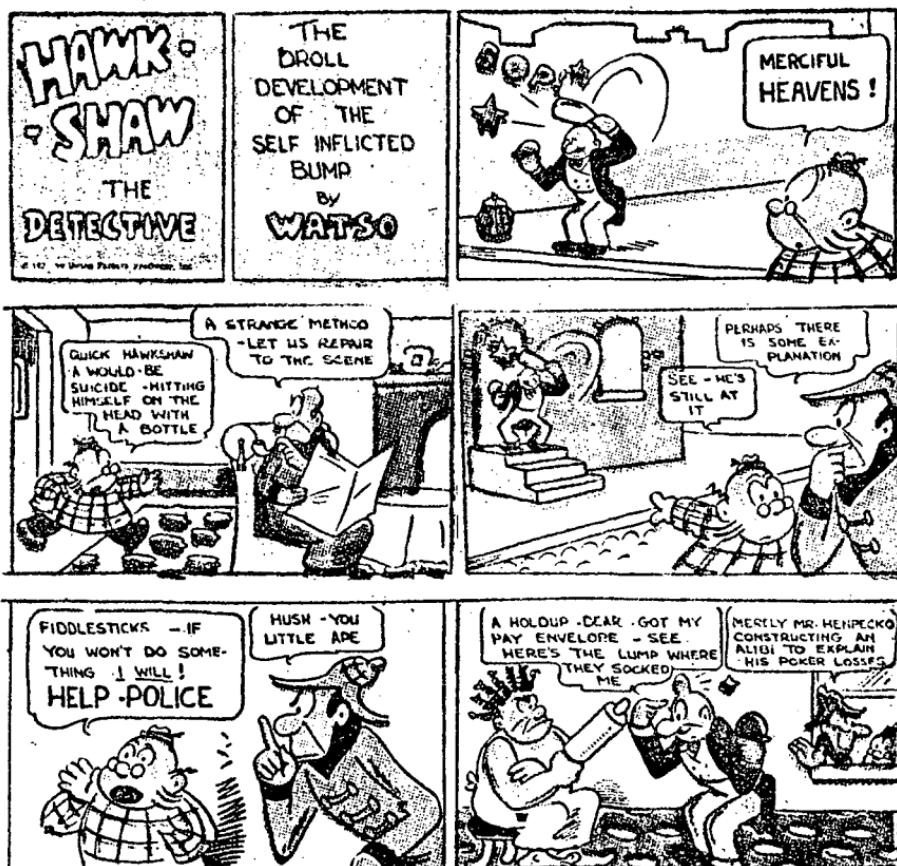
Lucy was looking thoughtful. "Oh, I don't know, Michael. I sort of enjoyed taking care of the little one with you. You and he were so cute together . . ."

Shayne closed his eyes and winced. He was going to have to watch his step for a while, that was for damn sure . . .

NEXT MONTH Mike Shayne returns in a brand new adventure, **DEATH IN THE DAILIES**. Don't miss it!

FICTIONAL DETECTIVES OF THE PAST

Hawkshaw the Detective first appeared in the *New York World* Sunday comic section on February 23, 1913, drawn by Gus Mager, and continued until 1922. It was reborn in 1931 for United Features Syndicate, as a companion piece to *The Captain and the Kids*, lasting until the late 1940's when Mager retired. The sample here is from the mid-1930's.



They were coming for the old man. He could hear their voices outside in the hall. They were coming to kill him for what he'd done that terrible day so long ago. This was it — the final showdown. He picked up his weapon and waited.

Once a Man

by MELODY HEIDENREICH

THE ROOM REEKED OF LYSOL AND THE OLD-MAN SMELL of urine and cigar-smoke. Brown water stains melted from the ceiling down the wall of the faded, peeling wallpaper. Stretched out on the iron cot was the spare, gaunt form of Henry Forbes, ex-sheriff of Jasper County. He fought to stem the trembling of his gnarled fingers as he groped for the head of his bed. With both hands on the rail, he dragged himself to his feet, scarcely feeling the cold of the worn linoleum. He pulled the grey porcelain chamber pot from under the cot, relieved himself, and slid it back. He never had much truck with looking glasses; now he was wryly grateful that he didn't have to face the specter of his withered form in long underwear, sleeves slack, crotch sagging.

He shook his head, rubbed the rheum from his eyes, trying to wipe away the curtain of dread that clouded his mind. It was like this every morning. He'd wake with fear in his gut, and worse, not know why. More than anything else, he wished he could identify the fear.

He reached for his pants; swaying, he lost his balance and toppled back on the mattress, groaning with the springs as he fell. Rushing over him came all the frustration of his 82-year-old body, the anger at his own weakness, and again, that unnamable fear. He fell back into half-sleep, exhausted with the effort of fighting the tears that most shamed him.

Outside they waited.

HENRY'S BLUE EYES FLASHED OPEN, THEN SQUINTED in concentration. Something, a smell, a sound, had pulled him from his drowse into his present. Then he heard it, the murmur of their voices, outside, in the hall.

The haze in his mind thinned. He began to grasp what he couldn't quite hang onto before. Again he pulled himself up, a sense of urgency causing him to fumble as he untangled his pants from around his ankles. He pulled them up, struggling to control his tremors as he hooked his button and braces, forgetting his fly. The shuffle of their feet, out there, brought his head up sharply, and fear again swept over him. "My God, it's March and Ed. They're here, after all these years, they've finally come."

It was almost a relief, for that which he feared the most, the bitter revenge threat of forty years ago, could at last be dealt with.

The hell with the shoes. He shuffled across the floor and from behind the oak commode pulled out his weapon, carefully deposited there five, or maybe six, years ago. None of the rooms he'd taken over the years had any amenities, but they'd all had a safe place to secure the weapon: that he'd been sure of. He wiped off the dust, warming to the feel of the wood as he rubbed it across the heel of his hand. He liked to keep his weapon close by.

HE ALWAYS KEPT IT CLOSE BY, LIKE THAT NIGHT in February. He was playing a few hands with Will Pierce, March and Ed Bolt, when his sometimes deputy, Ed Pulver, had come puffin' in.

"There's a run on the Ridge about to come through."

Damn, Henry was mad. In the first place, Pulver knew Henry kinda turned his head when the local boys ran a little hooch. But what really frosted him was the fact that he'd been losing all night, and he'd finally been dealt a full house — had to fold and leave it right there on the table. Henry shook his head.

He scooped up the weapon and followed the deputy out to the Model-A truck. There'd been a thaw, followed by rain and then a freeze, and it had been rough as goin' cross-ways on the corn rows driving down that rutty old Ridge Road.

"If only I'd blown a tire."

They were joltin' along, comin' up Blair Hill about to the curve where the hazel brush is so thick, when round the curve ahead Henry caught a glint in the dark ahead. "I shoulda known right then it was Chet Bolt's black '29 Chrysler. It was fast, and it was classy, and Chet kept it polished like the moon at midnight."

Bolt's car careened around the curve and sideswiped the Ford,

then came to an abrupt stop. "Even then, I thought if I just chewed Chet a little for his reckless drivin' we could kinda slide around the problem in the back seat. Heck, those black window curtains, and all, you really couldn't see nothin'. But I was worrying about what I was gonna do and I should have been worrying about what Chet was gonna do. 'Cause, he wasn't just runnin' hootch that night, he was drinkin' it.

"Chet jumped out of that car so fast, his feet didn't even touch the running boards. He headed for Pulver's door, and before I could get my cigar out of my mouth, Chet up and *shoots* Pulver, right in the shoulder! Before I could stop him, Chet took off on foot. Wasn't nothin' I could do but take out after him."

"I tried to wing him, honest to God I did, but just as I was aimin', he took a dodge to the left towards Tapley's Timber, and I got him square in the back. A shotgun does horrible things to a man. I reckon I never intended to see such a grizzly corpse. I reckon I never intended to use the weapon again.

"Until tonight," Henry told himself as he started back to the present at the sound of two sets of footsteps in the hall. "They must be out there, and brazen as a rabid coon. I always figured March and Ed meant it when they said 'We'll get you for this,' but after all these years"

HENRY PUT DOWN THE WEAPON JUST LONG ENOUGH to shove the commode in front of the door for a barricade, cursing the noise of the porcelain casters. He lifted one frayed edge of the green shade from the window, about an inch and a half. Seeing nothing, he resumed his post on the iron cot, weapon across his lap, waiting.

Outside, they were tired of waiting. "Henry, come out."

Henry waited, patting the weapon and smiling.

"Come on out of there. We don't want to have to come in and get you."

Still Henry waited, pushing down the fear that crept up his craw. The veins in the back of his bony hand began to jump as he tightened and loosened his grip on the weapon. He got up, checked the window, crossed to the commode barricade.

Suddenly, a banging shattered Henry's silence as they beat on the door. "Henry, open up."

Henry lurched back, shouting, "Come and get me, if you think you're men enough, Bolts."

With a thud the latch gave and with a screech the porcelain casters tore the linoleum as the barricade gave way. Henry stood tensed, de-

faint, weapon raised.

Mrs. Barnes hustled in, hands on hips. "Henry Forbes, put that toilet plunger down, and zip your fly. There now, put on your robe and come for breakfast. Breakfast at Morningside Home is promptly at seven o'clock, you know that."

Henry crumpled onto the iron cot . . . and wept.

**THEY'RE
LOOKING FOR
WOMEN...
MONEY...
A WAY OUT!**

Clashing wills — crashing action — from opening frame to flaming finish, every nerve in your body will be jolted. A teenage girl at the mercy of escaped killers who haven't seen a woman in years!

Paramount presents
HUMPHREY BOGART
FREDRIC MARCH
WILLIAM WYLER's
Production
THE DESPERATE HOURS

VISTAVISION

Arthur Kennedy · Martha Scott · Dewey Martin · Gig Young · Mary Murphy
Produced and Directed by WILLIAM WYLER · Screenplay by JOSEPH HAYES
Adapted from the novel and play by Joseph Hayes

Jimmy hated the man the way he hated rats and body odor, and he let the decade of Shota kan discipline take over, riding his instincts. His legs were rods on a kicking machine, his fists rocks to be hurled at the enemy. He was a tornado with arms, connecting left, right, everywhere . . .

PLOT

COUNTERPLOT

by CARL HOFFMAN

JAMES DANIEL BELL OF MADISON, WISCONSIN was 26 years old when, on an early afternoon in the month of May, he woke to the sound of snoring. Looking around, he discovered the skinny barmaid he had

picked up last night at the Pub asleep with her mouth open and her stringy hair across her face.

Jimmy ignored her. It was time to get up.

SPECIAL AGENT applicants undergo an initial battery of written examinations that are scored by computer at FBI headquarters in Washington . . .

Naked, he went into the spare room. Jimmy liked to describe himself as six feet two of prime fighting cop, and as if to prove it, he exploded through 50 jumping jacks and 50 pushups, then swung into a *kata*, front snap kick, left hand punch, whirling side kick, grunting as each blow connected with his imaginary opponent. He liked the feel of the air on his skin, the way it tickled the thick gold hair on his chest.

Should an applicant rank high enough as the result of the testing, he/she is afforded a formal interview, which is again computerized . . .

He turned and saw the skinny barmaid standing in the doorway, wearing nothing but her flowered panties. He reached out and stuck a fingertip in her navel.

She pulled away, laughing. "Aren't you the vain one."

"Huh?"

"You watched yourself in the mirror all the time you were practicing judo."

"It's *Shota kan*. Japanese karate." He brushed by her into the kitchen, got out orange juice, yogurt, granola bars. The barmaid followed.

"I bet you want me to leave."

"What the hell, have something to eat." He pushed a granola bar at her.

She unwrapped it with long pointed fingers and asked: "How come you've got so many guns?"

"I told you I'm a cop. I always carry a pair."

"That's not what I meant. I looked in the closet."

Chewing slowly, he watched her. "You looked in the closet."

"Two machine guns and three rifles. You gonna start a war?"

"Who said you could look in the closet?" He was giving her his tough-cop stare, the one he reserved for lawbreakers.

She met his gaze and for a moment seemed puzzled; then she realized he wasn't kidding. Disgustedly she said: "Cops. Always got a rule." She tossed granola bar onto the counter and walked into the bedroom. When she came back a few minutes later she was fully dressed. She let herself out without looking up or saying another word.

Jimmy was upset: a dumb chick had looked in his closet. The photo

of J. Edgar Hoover in its frame above the TV seemed to scowl more darkly..

IT DIDN'T GET ANY BETTER; JIMMY WAS BORED STIFF from the minute he got to work at 3 p.m. He and his partner, Detective Sergeant Denny Flanagan, spent nearly two hours shuffling from door to door in Nakoma, trying to turn a witness to a burglary that had gone down Friday night. No soap. Dennis was a former student radical, a lean tall nervous guy with eyebrows that knitted above the bridge of his nose, who still wore his dark hair shoulder-length. Jimmy couldn't go along with his politics — a Viet Cong with an AK-47 couldn't have forced Jimmy to one of those antiwar demonstrations, in fact, he wanted to join the Bureau so he could fight domestic subversion — but Jimmy had to admit Dennis was a first-rate cop, dead-on details, facts to the eyebrows, and what's more, he had a sense of humor. Which was a good thing, because otherwise Jimmy would have been practicing *Shota kan* on some of the primo jackasses they talked to. Now it was pushing six, and they were back in the squadroom; Jimmy was typing up a complaint for an accountant who'd had his bicycle stolen.

"What time did the theft occur?"

"Five-fifteen. Right outside my office building."

"What's the address?"

The accountant told him; it was way out, near West Towne. Jimmy said: "Let me get this straight, Mr. Pine —"

"Pinekenstein," the accountant said. "Pin-EK-en-stein."

"— you saw the suspect cut the chain and ride off?"

"Precisely. He had a huge pair of wire cutters. I shouted for him to stop, but of course he didn't. I gave chase, but the bicycle is too fast. A Raleigh Record."

Jimmy typed. "Would you recognize this guy if you saw him again?"

"Certainly. What are the chances my bike will be recovered, Officer Bell?"

This was the part Jimmy didn't like. "Hard to say. We know there's at least one ring of professional bike thieves operating near the university. If they're the ones that took it, it's probably halfway to Chicago by now."

"What if he's working on his own?"

"We'll do our best."

"I paid a great deal for that bicycle, Officer. It's less than a month old. I'd like to have it back."

Jimmy realized his butt was sore.

"I'll be back tomorrow to see what progress you're making."

The accountant stood up.

Watching him walk off toward the elevator, Jimmy shifted on his chair and removed the blackjack from his rear pocket. He had been sitting on it. He flicked it a few times against the desktop, wondering for the thousandth time whether the FBI would take him. They had to, damn it; the world was falling apart, entropy on parade, left-wingers, hippies, and he was the man to stop it, a one-in-the-solar-system confluence of physical capabilities and mental fitness. Give him a chance and he'd kick ass like a Claymore mine. But first he had to get in the Bureau.

He looked up when he realized Denny Flanagan was standing next to him. "Huh?"

"Six East Gilman. Homicide."

"Homicide?"

IT WAS A HOMICIDE, ALL RIGHT, and an important one.

"Michael Schrader," Dennis was saying to the cameraman taking shots of the body. "He's a lawyer and a writer."

Is? Jimmy thought. Was, partner. Was.

Michael Schrader, ex-lawyer, ex-writer, lay on his back at the foot of his huge mahogany desk, shirt front soaked in blood and marked here and there with small circles that looked like cigarette burns. Blood was drying in the carpet, smearing the documents and tape cassettes that lay scattered on the floor. The desk drawers stood open, more papers hanging out of them; in the lower left-hand drawer was a big reel-to-reel tape recorder with a remote control switch under the edge of the desktop, and microphones planted in the floor lamp and telephone receiver.

"Done here?" Jimmy asked the evidence technician who was dusting for fingerprints. "We could stand some air." He lifted the window.

Jimmy had just come in from canvassing the houses on this side of the street; Denny Flanagan had talked to the people on the other side. The burn couldn't have gone down in a nicer neighborhood. Six East Gilman was four blocks from Capitol Square on the Lake Mendota side, a hulking old relic with turrets, even a stained-glass window over the front door. There were half a dozen others like it on the surrounding blocks, yellow brick monsters every one. Denny Flanagan said he'd studied the area in high school; it used to be the high-rent district in the 1850's.

Jimmy sat back, munching a granola bar and soaking up atmos-

phere. It was past eight, almost full night. Lieutenant Nazareth Akgoulian, wearing his three-piece suit and technicolor smile, had just whizzed in from snowing the reporters outside. Something he was good at.

"Have we established the time of death?" Akgoulian asked.

"Five-twenty, give or take five minutes," said the head technician, who'd been in laboratories so long that his skin had wilted to the color of a fish belly. "Let's move on it, gentlemen."

The other evidence technicians began packing away their cameras and fingerprint powder, stowing the little plastic bags full of hair and dust in special leather cases labeled PHYSICAL EVIDENCE. A pair of white-suited ambulance attendants wheeled in the stretcher and hefted the corpse onto it, then covered the body and strapped it down. Jimmy huddled with Flanagan and Akgoulian.

"We've got a homicide here that's going to make the national news," Akgoulian said, and the widescreen grin had taken a walk; now he was Kojak. "Before I meet the press again I'd like to know a little more about it. Dennis, you're our expert on the radical fringe."

DENNIS HAD THE FACTS, ALL RIGHT. He was pacing now, rubbing his jaw a few times. "Michael Schrader first came to prominence in 1964, when he wrote one of the original JFK assassination conspiracy books. He's been in Madison periodically since last December, researching Karleton Armstrong and the Sterling Hall bombing in 1970. He claimed to have new evidence of a governmental cover-up, but I doubt that was more than PR. We might also question whether he spent all his time here doing research. We spotted him talking with a cocaine dealer we were tailing last winter. He was also very fond of women."

"He was renting this house?" Akgoulian asked.

"Right. Leased it in December." Flanagan had his notebook out now, and he was thumbing through it. "He was found dead just before six this evening by Ed Spear, a former radical, who's in the next room. Shot five times at close range by a .22 caliber weapon. One bullet missed, lodging in a copy of *Crime and Punishment* behind the desk. The study's a mess, and we can't be sure what's missing yet, though we've only been able to locate one tape for the reel-to-reel, the one that was set up to record when he was shot. Two phone calls on it, zip on the interest side. We're going to have to get his secretary in here to tell us if anything else is missing. Monica Adams."

"You know her, right?" Jimmy asked.

Flanagan nodded but didn't say anything. He consulted his notes

again. "Nobody in the neighborhood saw anything out of the ordinary this afternoon. Other things being equal, I'd say the number one motive at the moment has to be politics in some form. The Office, maybe. Maybe something else."

Jimmy was thinking about the piece, the .22. Politics, all right. In the last year there had been a half-dozen mob murders around the country committed with .22's. It was the new style of homicide. Time was, only a woman would carry something as small as a .22; a heavy-weight contractor didn't think he was armed unless he was packing a shotgun and at least two .45's. But suddenly the Hi-Standard G-380 was the weapon of choice of the whole Outfit. And most of the victims of the .22 killers had been informants for law enforcement agencies.

Jimmy felt his palate tingling with excitement, his gray cells shooting outward like ions. Proximity of unknown forces; possibilities and connections. Masked powers were warping into Mad City, rearranging the molecules, forging a new order. Schrader's death was a mind-bopper, an omen. Jimmy's head felt like a panful of popcorn under high heat, rocking its lid; he could hardly wait to get to work.

Flanagan was saying, "If this was a mob thing we can find whoever fingered him. We've got his appointment book. We can run down the people he's been talking to in the past couple months."

"What about this Ed Spear?" Akgoulian said. "I'd like to hear his story."

"I've been saving the best till last," Flanagan said. "Come on."

They headed across the hall.

ED SPEAR WAS SITTING IN AN ANTIQUE PLUSH CHAIR in the parlor, the front room of Schrader's rented mansion, pointedly not talking to the uniformed patrolman who sat smoking a cigarette on the couch.

"You can leave now," Akgoulian told the cop.

The patrolman killed his weed and walked out, and Ed Spear gave each of them a hostile glance in turn. He was a little guy dressed in a turquoise tee shirt and bluejeans; stiff brown hair with two or three strands of gray in it hung to his shoulders. He had a lean bony face composed of triangular planes, and his arm muscles were thick. He continued staring from one to another of their faces, then asked: "Well, am I under arrest or not?"

"No," Dennis said.

"We know your reputation," Akgoulian told him. "We know you don't like police officers."

Jimmy almost burst out laughing; Akgoulian was always coming out

with lines like that, playing straight man.

"Me not like cops?" Spear asked, mock-incredulously. "You got it wrong, lieutenant. It's always been a case of mistaken identity with me. All those times I got arrested and beat up for expressing my political views the cops were really after somebody else. Today I call in a dead body and spend two hours under armed guard, and I know you know I ain't the guy that did it. I know you fellows are here to apologize."

Jimmy sat down in one of the plush armchairs, removing a pack of sugarless gum from his coat pocket and shoving a piece in his mouth.

"Tell us about finding the body," Flanagan said.

"I already did."

"Lieutenant Akgoulian hasn't heard it yet."

"Great." Ed Spear gave a disgusted sigh. "Okay, so I ride my bike over here just before six. About ten minutes to six, got that?"

He looked at them as if he was explaining that two plus two equals four; he was being even more of a pain than he had the first time Jimmy heard this story.

Spear went on: "I ring the bell, no answer. Where's this bastard Schrader, I'm thinking, after all the crap he's handed me to set up this appointment. I ring again, still no answer. I'm getting mad now, ready to kick in the door. I try opening it, it's locked. Now I'm really mad. So I decide to take a walk around the place, see what's going on. I look in the windows of the study, there's big mess on the floor. I'm thinking suddenly somebody's in trouble, and what do I spot then but a pair of feet sticking out by the desk. Feet, I think, now this is heavy, man. So, being the good citizen I am, the only thing I can do is run up the block and phone John Law. End of story."

"There was something new this time," Jimmy said. "You said there was some trouble about setting up the appointment."

"Did I say that?"

Jimmy gave the little guy his cop stare, wondering how he'd look with his private parts dangling from his ears.

"I forgot what I meant by that," Spear said.

"I think I can fill you in," Flanagan interrupted. "It's in the notebook. Ed had an appointment with Schrader a week ago. After the entry Schrader has a notation reading TRY AGAIN SOON. I would interpret that as meaning there was some sort of disagreement during the first meeting. Is that right, Ed?"

"You're smart, chief. You got it."

"What did you argue about?"

"It's a long story," Spear said.

"We'll listen."

Spear thought about it for a moment. He said: "Look at it from my point of view. I ain't like a lot of people. I ain't given up my ideals."

Maybe Flanagan shifted a little.

Spear went on: "To me, Schrader was just a capitalist with a twist on the system. Basically he was interested in bread. I mean, true revolutionaries don't live in houses like this place we're sitting in. The book on Sterling Hall was a scam, a ploy for the radical chic. You know, everybody standing around at cocktail parties saying ain't I something, I know about Karleton Armstrong. While Karl's freezing in Waupun, Schrader's raking in the bucks. Got me?"

Flanagan asked: "You didn't approve of Schrader's motives, then?"

"Didn't approve is a stinking understatement, chief."

"Why did you make another appointment? Did Monica intervene?"

Spear slapped his forehead. "Hell, no, that bitch hates me. Schrader called up himself, began telling me what a valuable source I am, he couldn't possibly do justice to the Sterling bomb without me. I figured hell, I work in a bicycle shop, what good can I do Karleton? But Schrader might just accidentally write something that'll get him paroled sooner. Nothing intentional, you understand, strictly accidental. What's more, if I supply some of the information, the odds increase."

"So you talked to him. Where were you between five and the time you got here?"

"Riding my bicycle. A guy's gotta have some recreation."

"See anybody you know?"

"You mean have I got an alibi? I don't need one, man. I didn't off that capitalist pig." He looked at each of them in succession again, almost challenging them. "You gonna arrest me?"

Flanagan glanced at Akgoulian and said: "No. Not yet."

Jimmy thought: But maybe I'll apply a front snap-kick to your upper incisors.

"You mean I can split?"

Flanagan nodded.

"I'm free! I'm free!" Spear shouted. He jumped to his feet and threw his arms around Flanagan.

Denny pushed him away. "Get the hell out of here." Ed Spear dashed for the door.

For a moment Akgoulian stood looking after him. "Motive and opportunity. I'd keep my eye on Mister Ed Spear."

Flanagan rolled his eyes.

"What's your next move?" Akgoulian asked.

"Brace the secretary," Denny said. "Then we'll eat."

"Keep me informed." Akgoulian walked out as if the cameras were rolling.

Jimmy and Denny took a last look at the murder room, then went around switching off lights. They locked the house, and Jimmy kept the key. It was 8:45 on a warm night in the merry murderous month of May.

THEY GOT IN JIMMY'S CANDYAPPLE RED VAN with the tinted roof bubble and drove toward Monica Adams' apartment. Jimmy asked: "You lived with her how long?"

"Two years," Flanagan said. "Then I joined the cops. She didn't like that."

"Seen her since?"

"Once in awhile. Mainly with other guys." He didn't say anymore.

Jimmy wished he had another granola bar, something to crunch on. From what he'd heard of the story of Denny and this Monica, he could see how Flanagan wouldn't want to talk about it; he'd made a fool of himself and never got over her or something. It was like a lot of things about Denny; he was stuck in a time warp, existing in 1969. Stuck.

They turned down West Washington. The lady lived in one of the stinking three-story bungalows off Mifflin Street, with a herd of rusty bicycles in the entry hall. Denny knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" asked a woman's voice on the other side, quietly.

"Flanagan." Dennis sounded tense.

They heard locks being thrown; the door opened, and a curly-haired blonde wearing cutoff denims and a blue workshirt with the tails knotted above her stomach smiled at them hesitantly, then stepped forward and kissing Flanagan's cheek. She said: "I heard the radio. I've been waiting for you."

She led them inside. For straight looks, Jimmy wouldn't rate her more than six. She had a skinny nose that made her voice sound reedy, and her breasts were small. But there was more to it than looks. Her tail was class, and there was a straight-ahead swing to it. And the eyes were deep blue, a hundred miles deep. Untouchable.

On the other hand, Jimmy couldn't say much for her housecleaning. Cobwebs swayed in the draft and dust kitties were breeding along the baseboard. Dennis sat down on the couch, and Jimmy couldn't bring himself to follow suit because it was so filthy.

"You guys want some pop?" The blonde was hovering near the archway into the kitchen.

Flanagan looked at Jimmy, who shook his head. "No thanks."

Trying not to think about the dirt, he concentrated on the blonde. She still seemed uneasy, maybe a little scared, perching on the arm of an overstuffed chair across the room. Jimmy decided he wouldn't mind getting to know her better, a lot better.

Ha.

"How's it going?" Flanagan asked her.

"No big change, Dennis. I'm twenty-six, I've got a master's, I can't get a decent job. I do a little this and that. How're the cops?"

"No complaints. I was promoted first of the year. Sergeant."

"More bread, I bet."

"A little."

"I always knew you'd be a success when you put your mind to it, Dennis. A real Horatio Alger story."

Flanagan stopped and gazed into the corner of the room. He said, "Maybe we can get along without the old crap, Monica."

"Maybe," she agreed, slowly.

There was a silence. Jimmy imagined untying the workshirt.

Finally she asked: "Who found the body? They didn't say on the news."

"Ed Spear. On his way to an interview."

The blonde looked worried. "That's not good for Ed, is it. I mean, he didn't like Schrader."

Dennis shrugged. "What did you do this afternoon? You're the secretary. We figured you'd be at work in the study."

"Schrader used me for research about half the time. I was out interviewing John Melvin and Al Cook. Minor movement people. Schrader saved the heavyweights for himself."

"Did you come back to Gilman Street when you finished?"

"No. Al and I got to rapping, and by then it was almost five. I came straight home."

"Anybody see you?"

The blonde paused. And frowned. "Do you think I did it?"

"Maybe."

"You always were a bastard."

"Just doing my job."

"It wouldn't be your job if you didn't like it so much." The blonde's voice was tough, but maybe her eyes were wet.

She and Flanagan stared at each other.

"Ed Spear saw me," Monica said at last. No tears now.

"Where?"

"Here. In the bedroom."

Jimmy realized he was breathing fast.

Denny said, "Run that by me again. I didn't think you even liked Ed Spear."

"The little slime wanted a bribe," Monica said quietly. "That was the only reason he went back for the second interview."

"You laid him to get him to do it?"

"I've done it plenty times I didn't want to, Dennis. You ought to know that."

She gazed hard at Flanagan.

"Why didn't Spear mention this to us?" Dennis's voice sounded strained.

"He's going to tell you what a slime he is?"

"How about Schrader? Did you do it with him?"

Monica looked at Flanagan. "So what if I did? I told you, Dennis, I'm twenty-six and I can't find a decent job. I figured if I showed Schrader how indispensable I am, I might get out of this apartment. Take a look at it. You think I want to live in a place like this my whole life?"

The funny thing was, Jimmy realized, that Denny was reacting more than the woman. Not that she sounded happy, but she definitely could deal with her own actions. He couldn't.

Silence. Dennis said finally, "Okay. Tell us about Schrader's book. Was he into anything serious?"

"You mean like a government conspiracy? Nope, that was him running a publicity number on the media. He told everybody he was hot into the theory that the FBI was onto the bombers. That the feds knew who they were but let them run loose blowing things up, figuring eventually they'd discredit the antiwar movement."

"Which they actually did."

"I thought we were skipping the old crap, Dennis."

Flanagan smiled weakly. "Touche. But his theory didn't make sense, is that what you're saying?"

The blonde shook her head. "Nothing wrong with the theory. The feds do that kind of thing all the time. But I never saw anything to back it up. Just Schrader running around like every intelligence outfit in Washington had somebody on his tail. The guy's paranoia was through the roof, I'm not kidding."

"Is that why he had everything wired?"

"What?" The blonde looked stunned.

"We found microphones in the lamp and the telephone. Everything but the tapes."

For a moment Monica didn't say anything. "I don't know a thing about them."

"Who'd want to whack him out?"

She stopped and thought about it before answering; her hands moved back and forth over her thighs a couple times. "In Madison, nobody. I mean, there were plenty people he talked to who must've thought he was a jackass exploiting Karl Armstrong. But walk into his office and shoot him? Come on. These are peace people. It doesn't fit the pattern."

"Gangsters, then?"

"Maybe. He made a lot of phone calls, long distance, and worried about being tapped. Half the time I didn't know who he was talking to."

Flanagan stood up. "Thanks for the cooperation. Would you mind coming down to Gilman Street tomorrow? We have to determine what was stolen."

"Sure."

Jimmy got set to elave. Monica was gazing out the window; without looking at Flanagan, she said, "Would you stop acting so shocked, Dennis? We've all got to take our chances, and you sold out faster than anybody. Three years ago."

She turned and looked him full in the face.

Dennis started to say something two or three times but didn't; he walked out the door.

"We'll be in touch," Jimmy said, and followed his partner out to the van.

FLANAGAN WAS SO SHOOK THEY HAD TO GO TO THE VINE.
"This lousy case," he said as he poured his first schooner down his throat. "It's turning into a lousy autopsy on my past."

Jimmy sipped his Seven-Up. "You're still hung up on her, aren't you?"

"Sure. She's almost a symbol. All the time I was selling out, she was going her own way. Free."

Jimmy downed some more soda, thinking that Denny had it wrong. There was no way that being a cop, serving the city and ultimately, the country, was a sellout. No way. On the other hand, he could see that if you started taking Monica Adams too serious, she'd run a job on your frontal lobes, not to mention other parts of your anatomy. Sexy, no joke, but he'd never met anybody more pessimistic. Discouragement to the max. Suddenly Jimmy felt he could understand Flanagan better, the 1969 hangup. Denny's whole trip had to do with loyalty, and that was something Jimmy could respect. Come to it, he could respect *anybody's* loyalty, even Joe Stalin's. Me against the world,

Jack, draw the line.

Flanagan was talking again, gulping more brew. "Nineteen seventy, right after Kent State. That was the first time I saw her. The night of May fifth, 1970. We started at ROTC and marched over the whole campus, and the cops kept popping up along the way. It was like the Mister Toad ride at Disneyland, turn a corner and there was a gang shooting teargas, pop pop. I must have run ten miles that night. Eventually we started running down the lakeshore together, her and me." He chugged the second schooner. "I'd never seen her before that night. She said she was so turned on she had to make it in the bushes."

"You did that?" Jimmy laughed to himself.

"I didn't see her again for six months. She just forgot about me." Dennis motioned to the bartender.

"Aren't you drinking too much?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah yeah." Instead of letting the bartender refill his glass, Flanagan paid for the beer and the 7-Up. "Where do you want to eat, Jim?"

"The Sunshine Kitchen, where else."

DENNY SPENT FIVE MINUTES AT THE PAY PHONE before they walked over. The Sunshine was all-natural, Jimmy's favorite, just a block down State Street. The smell of sawdust on the floor gave him a rush as they walked in. "What's the buzz from the squadroom?"

"Nothing much. Phil left a message saying he wanted to see me. I called and told him to meet us here."

"Phil?" Jimmy asked.

"The Friendly Fed. You know."

The waitress came and took their order, and when it arrived, Jimmy ate his soyburgers with gusto, stoking a shine: food, restaurant, casework were all primo tonight. He hadn't even thought about the Bureau for the last couple hours, but now, remembering it, he felt a wave of trembling descend from his shoulders to his hips. They had to let him in — he'd never wanted anything more in his whole life. He'd promise to eat only junk food, never look at another woman, if only they'd let him in.

"There's Phil," Denny said.

Jimmy looked around. A fat man with a beard was shambling toward their table, Phil from the local office of Drug Enforcement Administration. Jimmy had met him once or twice before, and hadn't been too thrilled by the experience; Phil was a young guy, 27 or 28, and an ex-radical, which was why he connected with Denny, but Jimmy always had the feeling Phil was evaluating the locality, sizing it up for maxi-

mum exploitation. More was moving behind those pale brown pig's eyes than he wanted anybody to know.

"You come most stealthily upon your hour," Denny said.

"Tis now struck twelve, get thee to bed, Francisco." The fat man sat down at their table. "How goes it, gents? I hear today was a big day."

Jimmy wanted to tell Phil he should wear socks with his Roman sandals, the smell of his feet was uncouth. Instead he grabbed some raisins and leaned back, popping them into his mouth a few at a time. Phil was dressed like usual, baggy jeans and a corduroy sportcoat with leather patches on the elbows. When he moved, Jimmy could glimpse the shoulder holster with the Walther PPK in it, and the bulge of the ebonite nightstick he always carried.

"I hear Mike Schrader got shot full of holes," Phil was saying. "How's it so far? What's the thinking?"

Jimmy stopped chewing and gave the fat man his cop stare. "Why do you ask?"

"Cooperation between investigative agencies," Phil said smoothly as Jimmy watched sly wheels turning behind his eyes. "Pooling of information. I might be able to help you out."

Jimmy popped some more raisins in his mouth and continued staring.

Denny Flanagan seemed embarrassed. "Right now we're thinking it's a hit, trying to determine who fingered him."

"Maybe I can help." The fat man leaned closer to Dennis, like it was a private conference between the two of them. "Word's out that Schrader was into some dealing on the side. Nothing to interfere with his literary efforts, but enough to keep him in small change."

"Anything on who he was supplying?"

"A small group of responsible people employed in and around Capitol Square. But I hear Michael's place was wired like the Oval Office. Any truth to that?"

"What if there is?"

"Check out the tapes, man. He might have been trying to collect some more bread selling them back to somebody."

Flanagan relaxed, sitting back in his chair. "Too late. The tapes're missing."

"Missing? Missing?" The fat man looked thoughtful. He withdrew the nightstick from under his coat, and began tapping the edge of the table with it. "Ah, crap. You've searched the study?"

"Every inch. We're going to toss the rest of the house tomorrow, but it looks clean. Nothing obvious."

The drumming of the nightstick got quicker. "Tough. Tough."

Abruptly Phil whirled on Jimmy: "Enjoy your meal, Jim? You never told me how you got into health food, you know."

Jimmy was downing the last of the cheese. He had the feeling the question was a smokescreen, but he wasn't going to give a damn thing away. "Freshman year I broke my jaw playing soccer. I was wired shut for two months, on a liquid diet. Decided once I got the wires cut I wasn't going to put no crap in my mouth anymore."

Phil laughed, too damn loud. "Bravo. I like a man that won't put no crap in his mouth." He stood up. "Sorry I couldn't be of more assistance to you gents. But keep me informed, right?"

"Sure," Denny said.

Jimmy watched the fat man shambling out the door, and he knew something had to be done. He didn't trust Phil.

"What say we go back to the squadroom?" Flanagan was asking. "Check out the notebooks."

"I got an idea."

Jimmy didn't trust Phil because Monica hadn't known a thing about all this dealing and blackmailing Schrader was supposed to be into, because Phil had asked that question about health food right after talking about the tapes.

"Tell me," Flanagan said.

Because Phil's words smelled, *more* than his feet smelled. "Let me work on it."

Jimmy stood up.

"Hey, wait," Flanagan protested.

But Jimmy was already pushing out the door, onto the sidewalk crowded with drunk U students. He knew now what had to be done: pin a tail on Phil the Friendly Fed until something happened, because something was going to happen, he *knew* it.

The fat man was half a block up State Street, weaving through the crowds. Jimmy followed without looking back.

ONE OF JIMMY'S GIRLFRIENDS HAD TOLD HIM ONCE he looked like a Greek god named Apollo, and that had surprised him, because up to then he'd thought Apollo was a space shot. But when he shagged his tail over to the library and laid his hands on a mythology book, he had to admit the comparison was pretty flattering, and not totally off the wall, either. He had the muscles and the gold hair, at least. But it also demonstrated the main problem he had shadowing: six-feet-two-inches-190-pounds of prime fighting cop with shimmering blond hair is easy to pick out of a crowd. Add in the facts that it was nighttime, and Phil knew him already, and the only thing you could bet

on was that tracking the fat man was a son of a bitch of a job.

On the other hand, Jimmy was an A-1 tailman. He whipped out the black wool watchcap he always carried for occasions like this, and suddenly he wasn't blonde any longer. Then he crumpled up his shoulders and slouched along like Phil, and presto, he was nothing but another juicehead out crawling pubs.

At first it looked like Phil was just a barhopper himself. After he left the Sunshine Kitchen he ambled up to The Vine and stayed long enough for a beer or two, while Jimmy stood in the shadows at the mouth of an alley across the street, and took the opportunity to strip off his trainman's jacket and shoulder holster, wrapping one in the other. When the fat man came out he wasn't alone; beside him was a heavy blond woman, and even though the light was bad, Jimmy thought he recognized her: Big Sylvie, one of the town's women dope dealers.

It wasn't totally unexpected, but Jimmy still felt his mouth muscles turning down, his cheeks going rigid.

The two of them, Phil and Sylvie, cruised up to the corner of State and Johnson and met somebody else, a tall guy Jimmie made as Donald Douglas, a/k/a Donald Duck; this was turning into the weekly meeting of the Madison Associated Weed Dealers, as Denny Flanagan might say. The conference lasted maybe five minutes, and then Phil said goodbye and continued up toward the Square, and that was when the son of a bitching part of the tail really took hold. There was plenty traffic on the Square, but there were damn few pedestrians, so Jimmy had to stay back even farther as he trailed the fat man across the Capitol grounds and down the hill on the other side. A block from the Square Phil entered the federal courthouse where he had his office, and Jimmy stood in the doorway of the office building across from it and prayed to Oxnard, the god of police dicks, that the fat man wouldn't leave by the back door.

He didn't, but he didn't keep walking, either.

Jimmy had been standing in the doorway fifteen minutes when he spotted Phil leaving the courthouse by the side exit near the parking lot. Jimmy stood his ground, knowing that if he ran he might get spotted, and there was a 50-50 chance Phil would drive back this way anyhow. In a moment the fat man's car, a silver Corvette, came sliding out of the lot and nosing back up the hill toward the Square. Jimmy hot-footed up the slope after the Chevy's disappearing taillights, dodging through the six lanes of traffic, all the time watching the silver car as it circled the Square, and when it turned off on the north side, he was pretty sure where Phil was going.

He ran.

LEAVE IT TO THE FAT MAN TO KNOW ENOUGH about burglary to make a reconnaissance before committment, so Jimmy had time to stash himself behind a bush in the backyard of the house adjoining Six East Gilman before Phil appeared. The bearded man was now a fat blob in the darkness, carrying an oblong that was probably a toolbox full of burglar's tools; he leaned for a moment against the mansion's back door, and the door became a hole whisking him and his toolbox inside. In a moment Jimmy could see the faint backwash of a flashlight through the kitchen window; the light died as Phil moved into the front part of the house.

Jimmy moved too. He tiptoed around the west side of the mansion and peeked through the window into the study where Michael Schrader had been squibbed. The window was behind the desk, and Jimmy could see the scissoring shadows of Phil's legs as the fat man moved into the parlor, ignoring the study completely; Jimmy slipped around the front of the house and peered in again. The light was bad in the parlor, natch, but he could still see well enough to make out Phil crouched in front of one of the bookcases, not far from the plush chair where Ed Spear had sat earlier tonight. The fat man looked like a cockroach, pawing through the volumes, shining the light into the shelf behind the books. Trying to lay his hands on something.

Jimmy stood there, thinking about it.

He wanted whatever Phil was after, no joke. But he didn't want to bust him just now; it might be more instructive to follow him around awhile longer and see what he turned. Which meant there was only one thing he could do, and that was trickier than walking across Lake Mendota.

He had already put on his shoulder holster and jacket again; now he drew the .357 and took the house key out of his pocket. He walked firmly up the two steps to the front door and stuck the key in the lock as loudly as he could, rattling the knob a few times and saying, "Hell," to make it seem like he was having trouble with the lock. He had to be sure Phil would hear him: any professional burglar, hearing somebody coming, would drop the score and head for the exit. And Jimmy figured Phil for a professional burglar. He swung open the door, and it was only then he realized he'd managed a first-class screw-up.

BECAUSE A FLASHLIGHT BLAZED IN JIMMY'S FACE, and something hard as iron smashed into his gunhand, sending the piece spinning to the entry-hall throwrug. Jimmy was partly blinded, but his

peripheral vision was good enough to catch the gleam from the ebonite billy club as Phil swung it back for another blow, and in that split second Jimmy's head circuitry tripped from normal to autodirect, CLICK, and he lashed out with a snap kick that connected with soft flesh, the mental bypass wires assuming their load, integrating and commanding faster than he could think.

He whirled back out of range, dazzled, right hand still throbbing from the first blow, but his left hand found the wall switch as if magnetized, the flood of light catching Phil in a forward plunge with the nightstick, Jimmy diverting the blow easily with a left-hand block so swift it seemed a magic trick. That was when an extra throb of juice in Jimmy's head made him cognizant that the fight was over, the bearded man had run out of time, and the smartest thing Phil could do was give up.

But the fat man gave no sign he wanted to surrender, and from Jimmy's viewpoint that was the best news tonight, no argument at all, because it had been a rocky 45 minutes since he left the Sunshine, and he wanted to take it out on somebody. There was that bitch of a tail-job that had led to this meeting engagement, there was the humiliation of bungling Phil's reaction to the barge-in, there was the pain in his right hand and the stupid fact that in ten years of *Shota kan* discipline he'd used his skill in actual combat maybe three times. But most of all there was the outrage that had been smoldering since Phil showed up at the Sunshine, flaring out when he saw the fat man with Sylvie and Donald Duck, conflagrating now in his arms and legs and brain, racing along the nerves like righteous fire.

Entropy, the world falling apart. Phil the Friendly Fed was entropy personified, a sorry excuse for a man, let alone for a federal operative. Jimmy hated him the way he hated rats and body odor, and he let the decade of discipline take over, riding his instincts, the neural waves pulsing to his limbs. His legs were rods on a kicking machine, his fists rocks to be hurled at the enemy. He was a tornado with arms, connecting left, right, overwhelming the fat man, who became a pliant sack of guts which collapsed on the floor of the entry hall, bleeding on the throwrug. Jimmy stood over him, catching his breath, remembering the omen. Now he knew what it meant, nine hours late but welcome just the same:

Asskicking time in Mad City.

He stooped and picked up his service revolver, then disarmed Phil and handcuffed him to the leg of a heavy table. He switched on the parlor light and went to look at the bookcase. Phil had cleared the bottom shelf of its volumes, and as Jimmy got close he could see the shelf

was a scam: what it really was was a lid with recessed hinges. He opened it. Inside were 20 or 30 flat square boxes marked "3M Recording Tape," dated back to the previous December. Jimmy didn't have to listen to them to know what they were: the collected conversations of Michael Schrader.

He went back and eyeballed Phil; the fat man was still out. He walked into the study, picked up the phone, and called Dennis Flanagan at police headquarters; Denny sounded happy to hear from him, but toned down when Jimmy told him about Phil. Flanagan said he'd call an ambulance and come right over himself.

Jimmy hung up and looked at his watch. It was 11:45. His right hand tingled; it had been a tough day. He needed some R and R. A girl named Gail at his apartment complex had been giving him the up-and-down for the last month; he picked up the phone again and dialed on the chance she'd meet him for a drink at the Carriage House in 45 minutes.

He hit the odds. She would.

It must have been 3:30 before Jimmy got to sleep.

LABYRINTH, AND THE BELL RANG. There were always appointments, Jimmy realized, even in the Tunnel. *Tunnels*, it should be: left, right, he'd been here forever, walking down the lakeshore. Sooner or later he'd hit Chicago, the big time. Then the bell rang again, and the significance was borne in on him, bell-Bell, and he decided to open his eyes.

Gail was asleep next to him, and the telephone was ringing. He rolled over and picked it up sleepily. "Yeah."

"Jim, it's Dennis. Sorry to wake you up."

"Yeah?"

"I've been listening to Schrader's tapes all night. I've got it figured, I think."

Jimmy was awake enough by now to realize that Denny sounded pretty beat himself. "What's the story?"

"Phil." Denny's voice trailed off for a two-count; he was even more tired than Jimmy'd thought. "Phil was supplying Schrader with cocaine. But there's more."

Jimmy sat up in bed. "What else?"

"He and Schrader were business associates. They were into coke referrals. In exchange for free cola, Schrader would tell his high-class friends about Phil. New customers. Expand the trade."

"Heavy heavy, ten-four," Jimmy said. He was getting excited now. Next to him, Gail turned over and settled again, still asleep.

Dennis went on in a voice that faded in and out, like a distant radio station: "This explains why Phil tried to take you last night when you broke in on him. He couldn't afford to let us get hold of the tapes."

"Think he chilled Schrader? Maybe they had an argument?"

"I've thought." Flanagan's voice trailed off; there was a long pause. "I've thought about that a lot, Jim. I don't think so."

"Why not?" Jimmy questioned. "He doesn't have an alibi, does he? Even if he does, he might have had help from the Office."

"Possible," Dennis answered. "He's the perfect pigeon, all right. But the fact. The fact he burgled the place argues against it. If Phil did it —" the voice faded again — "or had it done, the tapes would've been lifted at the same time as the hit. He wouldn't have had to go back."

Silence.

"Dennis?"

"Sorry. I've been up all night. And I feel like a milewide jackass."

"You mean because of Phil?"

"Yeah. And because —" The voice trailed off. "Forget it. There's zip in the Corvette. We're waiting for a warrant for the apartment. That'll be this afternoon. Right now I'm going home. And Ed Spear's coming in later. To make an official statement about finding the body."

For a moment there was silence on the line. Then Flanagan's voice came very quietly: "Back to square one."

Jimmy hung up. Good old Flanagan. Maybe he'd been a radical once, and maybe Phil had made a fool of him, but he wouldn't give up. Head down, three yards at a time. Facts, details.

He slipped on a pair of jeans, peeked between the curtains; sunshine was flooding the parking lot. But something like a cloud shadow crossed his mind; it was time to get the mail. Maybe there was word from the Bureau.

HE DIDN'T BOTHER PUTTING ON A SHIRT OR SHOES. He walked through the apartment, into the sunshine on the balcony, down the wooden stairs toward the mail kiosk, and with each step he could feel the tension building. In a lot of ways these were the worst minutes of the day, looking in the box, dreading what he might find there. All the bad things that had ever happened to him, from the Dear John letter from Beth Olson, to the notice that he'd flunked out of college, had come through the mail. It was a good thing the postman got here early, so Jimmy didn't have to wait all day; if he'd had to spend a lot of time thinking about it, he might have made himself sick. He pulled open the box. Inside were three envelopes: two bills, and one marked

with the return address FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.

He picked it up like a death warrant. Because it couldn't be good news; good news from the Bureau came over the phone, not through the mail.

Maybe there was a mistake, he thought, and ripped open the envelope just to make sure. His hands were shaking. He started to snatch out the letter, then stopped; no point breaking down completely, making a total jackass of himself. He pulled the sheet out slowly and carefully, but still managed to tear one corner as he unfolded it. "Dear Mr. Bell," he read,

We have given careful consideration to your application for the position of SPECIAL AGENT in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After much deliberation, however, we must inform you that you do not fulfill the Bureau's present hiring needs . . .

Lead sank through his stomach. A wave of trembling traveled from his biceps to his wrists. He wanted to say it wasn't fair, except he knew it was. He wanted to say there'd been a mistake, except he knew there hadn't. Ten years of *Shota kan*, five years with the cops, all shot to hell.

He felt like a fool, a goddamn enormous fool.

His head started to throb.

When he got back to the apartment, Gail met him in the living room. "Where have you been, Jimmy?"

Abruptly he couldn't stand the sight of her; the lazy broad hadn't even put on her clothes yet, and in the morning light her skin looked wrinkled, dirty. For a moment he couldn't find his voice. Then he croaked, "Get out."

"What?"

"Get out," he was really mad now, "GET OUT!" and now he was throwing things, a pen, a glass, anything at hand, she was turning to scuttle into the bathroom, screaming, an ashtray spinning into the wall, gouging the plaster, and now he was throwing barstools, the chairs from the breakfast nook, whirling back across the kitchen like a cyclone, upending the breadbox, into the front room, the lamps going over in his wake, until finally he came face to face with the photo of J. Edgar Hoover in its frame above the TV. He gazed for a moment at the scowling heavy-jowled face, which now seemed to be sneering at him, and ripped the photo from the wall, cocking his arm and hurling frame and all through the living room window, so it arced across the balcony and smashed in the parking lot below. Asskicking time in Mad

City, and everybody in the goddamn town was included, everybody, no exceptions.

LATER HE WAS ASHAMED AND BUSTED HIS TAIL in the police gym. Three sets of everything, followed by intricate *Shota kan* combinations and four miles on the track. When he finished he was soaked in sweat, a state that normally left his brain rinsed, but today it didn't work: as he showered off, his headache came galloping back like a gang of outlaws.

It didn't get any better when he re-armed and shagged up to the squadroom. It was just two o'clock, and Denny Flanagan was still home, sleeping off ten hours of duty topped by nine hours with a reel-to-reel tape player. Jimmy figured the most useful way to pass the time till he got back was by listening to some of the tapes Dennis had left piled on his desk — they were a half-hour to a side, and Flanagan had only managed to get through about half last night — so he plugged in the machine and started fiddling with them, and then Akgoulian stepped off the elevator.

"Hi ho, coppers," he greeted.

Today the lieutenant was wearing his blue three-piece with the hairline pinstripe, probably because it looked good on video tape, and his smile glinted bright as his shoeshine. He was strutting like he'd cracked the Schrader case singlehanded, and started telling everybody who'd listen how he'd just finished a news conference cluing the network guys that there'd been a major arrest in connection with the homicide and the suspect was still in the hospital but a search was about to be conducted of his apartment. Then Akgoulian hit with the big news: there'd be footage on two of the national news shows tonight.

All the time the lieutenant was putting on his performance Jimmy was trying to listen to the tapes, but it was pretty boring stuff, mostly run-of-the-mill phone calls and conversations, and he was having trouble keeping his mind on it. Then Akgoulian spotted him and swung into the Kojak routine: "When do we expect the warrant for Phil's apartment back from the D.A.?"

"Another hour or so," Jimmy lied; actually, the D.A.'s office had done a rush job and it was already in his desk. But he was damned if they were going to search Phil's apartment without Dennis Flanagan.

"Let me know the minute it gets here," Akgoulian said. "Chief Holly is following this case closely."

Jimmy nodded, sitting back and trying to listen to the tape, waiting for Dennis to check in. It was 2:20.

AT 3:25 HE WAS STILL WAITING, so he gave Denny's place a buzz. He figured Dennis had probably just conked after the long night and needed someone to wake him up. But even though he let the phone ring a dozen, fifteen times, there was no answer.

Then Akgoulian came strolling by again: "Did that warrant come in, Jimmy?"

"Not yet. I'll let you know."

"By the way, where's Dennis?"

"He told me he was going to stop off on Gilman Street on the way in today."

Akgoulian looked unhappy, but he went away.

And if Jimmy didn't have enough problems already, Shrimp Spear showed up to make his deposition. He hadn't changed his clothes since yesterday, and he hadn't taken a bath, either. Obviously.

"How's it feel to be a guard dog for the ruling classes?"

"Damn good," Jimmy growled.

"Temper, temper." Spear clicked his tongue.

Jimmy was going through his desk, opening drawers and slamming them shut.

"Lieutenant on your tail?" Spear asked cheerfully. "Too bad you can't pin it on me."

"You should have told us you were with the blonde the first time we asked."

"Gentlemen keep their mouths shut." Spear grinned.

Jimmy found a tape in the bottom desk drawer and got everything set up. He picked up the microphone: "This is Officer James Bell of the Madison Police Department with Edward Spear. Spear is — "

"Mister Spear," the shrimp corrected.

Jimmy was ready to kill him. "Mister Spear is about to make a formal deposition in connection with the homicide of — "

"Officer Bell, there you are."

It was a new voice, a new interruption. Jimmy looked up, about to explode; standing by the desk was the accountant who'd had his bike ripped off yesterday, Pain-in-the-Butt What's His Name. Jimmy had forgotten about him completely until this moment. "Look, Mr. Pine — Mr. PinEKenstein, I'm — "

"But I see you've caught the man. Did you recover my bike too?"

Jimmy stopped, "Huh?"

"This is the man who stole my bike." He indicated Ed Spear, who was hunching up in his seat, looking like he'd rather be someplace else. "Did you get the bicycle back too?"

Jimmy glanced at Spear, then back at Pinkenstein. "You're sure this

is him?"

"Positive. He's even wearing the same blue shirt."

It took Jimmy ten minutes on autopilot, all the time thinking of something completely different, to check it out. He rode Spear and the accountant down in the elevator and circled the police building until Pinekenstein spotted his bicycle padlocked to a parking meter. Spear kept saying the bike wasn't his, he'd taken the bus downtown, but Jimmy figured he had more than enough probable cause to search the Shrimp's pockets, and you bet, attached to his keyring was some metal that opened the lock. Jimmy chained the bicycle up again, and copied the serial number into his notebook. Then he herded the two back up to the squadroom and checked the MPD bicycle records, where he discovered that a Raleigh Record with that serial number had been registered to Henry R. Pinekenstein the previous month. That cinched it. The accountant signed the formal complaint and blew the squadroom, muttering that he'd see Eddie in court, and Jimmy ran Shrimp through the booking procedure, still thinking about other things. Because a certain side of the Schrader case had got whacked into the next solar system by Spear lifting a Raleigh, and as soon as Eddie was locked up tight, Jimmy stowed the famous search warrant in his pocket so Lieutenant A couldn't lay hands on it, and went to see Monica Adams.

SHE SAT ON THE CHAIR-ARM AGAIN, but this time she didn't look nervous; she looked mad. "I've told you already."

"Tell me again," Jimmy said.

"How come you're alone? Where's Dennis?"

"Sick." He looked her up and down. "Answer the question. Where were you at 5:15 yesterday?"

"I told you. With Ed Spear."

He gave her his cop-stare. "Liar."

She stared back. "Ask Ed."

"Eddie lies too," he said. "The first thing he told us, he was riding his bike. Not much of an alibi until you rolled out that crap about laying him. We should've pressed harder when you said it, but Denny's a sucker for you."

Not that I blame him, Jimmy thought.

He continued. "This afternoon Spear played Mister Smiley, telling us all about making it with you. I figure you must've talked to him last night, told me we thought he did it but you were willing to supply an alibi. And Eddie had reasons of his own for saying yes."

"What reasons?"

"At five-fifteen he was stealing a bicycle. Way out on the west side."

"You can prove that?"

"I already have."

Maybe she tensed a little.

"So there's no way in hell Spear could've blown down Schrader," Jimmy said. "But I got to wondering why you alibied for a guy you don't even like. I figured there's only one answer: give him an alibi and you've got one-yourself." He took a deep breath, priming himself for his move.

"So you think I killed him," Monica said.

"I know you did," Jimmy snarled, and sprang into the act, ripping the cushions off the ragged davenport, tossing them onto the floor, running his hands into all the crevices of the sofa.

"What are you doing?" Monica shouted.

"WHERE'S THE GUN?" he roared, and shoved past her to the sideboard, pulling out the drawers, emptying them on the floor. "Where's the lousy gun?"

She jumped him from behind, punching, and he whirled and grabbed her shoulders as she tried to kick him. He sidestepped, catching the kick on his hip, and shoved her toward the bedroom. "GET IN THERE."

She tried to slam the door in his face, but he got his boot in first, and stiff-armed her onto the mattress which lay among dustballs on the floor. She sprang up, backing away, then broke for the bureau near the closet. He let her get there first, hoping she was going for the gun; she had her hand inside the drawer when he grabbed her wrist and pulled it out. She was clutching a long, sharp letter opener. He wrenched it out of her hand.

She spat in his face. "Bastard."

He lunged, pinning her arms, trying to hold them with one hand, but she was too strong.

"Son of a bitch," she cursed.

"Where's the gun?"

"Bastard!"

"WHERE'S THE GUN?"

Abruptly she went limp, withdrawn, her voice dropping: "Lake Mendota."

"Where in Lake Mendota?"

"Off the Union dock."

"Show me." He let her up; she backed away. He said: "I won't hurt you."

"Sure." Her voice had an edge again.

SHE STAYED AWAY FROM HIM ON THE WAY OUT to the van, and didn't say anything as they drove to the Union. But he watched her out of the corner of his eye and judged by her expression that she was figuring out that almost everything he'd done was illegal, so she wouldn't have to worry about cooperating.

When they reached the Union parking lot he changed into a pair of cutoff bluejeans in the back of the van. Then they went outside. Standing on the dock, Monica gave directions. Luckily the water was only chest-deep, and the spectators he attracted got too bored to hang around. It took him a half-hour to find the gun, and then he stepped on it, literally. He dived, felt around, and brought it to the surface, a Hi-Standard Olympic .22 automatic, not too far removed from the G-380's the Outfit had been using. She couldn't have figured a better scam for jackassing the cops if she'd sat down with Professor Moriarty.

He levered himself onto the pier and sat there drying while Monica continued to stay out of arm's reach.

"You'll never convict me on this evidence," she said.

"Right."

"Do you always work this way?"

"Of course not. Think I'm a animal?"

"I've got my doubts."

They looked at each other.

"I needed the piece first," he explained, standing up, feeling ashamed. "Want a ride home?"

"Not with you." She turned away.

He walked back to the van and started it up. Even as short a time as he'd known Monica, he felt he'd lost something by treating her the way he had.

Like the Bureau.

Like everything lately.

AKGOULIAN WAS MAD THAT JIMMY HAD BEEN GONE so long, but he laid off quick enough when Jimmy pulled out the search warrant and said he'd been over at the D.A.'s kicking tail to get it. A herd of newsmen followed the cops to Phil's apartment, and waited outside while the police tossed the place. Akgoulian himself zeroed in on the Hi-Standard Olympic .22 automatic in the toilet tank in Phil's bathroom; he was so happy to find the gun that he didn't even eat out Jimmy, who was already searching the place but hadn't touched the tank yet. Akgoulian spent a half hour putting on a man-and-gun act

for the newsguys; Jimmy stayed for most of it before zapping over to the Sunshine Kitchen for dinner, hoping it would cheer him up. But all he could think about was the Bureau, Monica, and Denny Flanagan, who still hadn't showed up for work, and after eating, Jimmy drove over to Villa Apartments to see him.

He climbed the stairs to the third floor and knocked on Denny's door. At first there was no answer, but after he knocked a couple more times Dennis finally opened, bottle in hand, and looked at him drunk-enly. "Come on in. I've been expecting somebody."

Hard rock music was playing in the other room. Jimmy went in and sat down.

Dennis asked: "Want a drink?"

"Why not."

"Good boy." Dennis filled another glass. "What did Akgoulian say when I didn't show?"

"I told him you called in sick."

"Thanks, Jim." Dennis stared out the dark windows, then took a long drink and asked: "Well, did you catch her?"

"The Schrader case is shut up tight, if that's what you mean."

"I figured. But I couldn't stand being there to watch." Flanagan took a sip. "Did she confess?"

"Phil's still in the hospital," Jimmy said, measuring his words carefully; he had to watch it or they'd be open to charges of criminal conspiracy. "He ain't going to jail until the day after tomorrow."

Flanagan was starting to catch on now. "Phil?"

"We searched his place this afternoon. Akgoulian found the .22 himself, not to mention the rest of the arsenal that slick bastard had stowed away up there. I wouldn't be surprised if this haul closes up a few of the other unsolveds."

Flanagan didn't comment, just sat staring at him, and even through he was drunk Jimmy could see his brain working. Looking away from Jimmy, he asked quietly, "Did you hear from the feds today?"

"They turned me down."

"Sorry, Jim."

Suddenly all Jimmy could remember was the thinking he'd done since this morning, more than he'd done in one day in his whole life, a goddamn cloudburst of thinking that had cracked the dam and powered straight over everything he'd ever believed in, gouging out his gray cells, so when the thinking was finished all that was left was him, Jimmy Bell, and his loyalties, and it was draw the line, pal, stick to priorities, and Dennis came first, no debate.

Denny asked: "Did you listen to any of those tapes?"

Jimmy shook his head.

Dennis said: "There was one in particular. An argument in the study. Schrader was trying to get Monica to put out for him. She wouldn't. Even threatened to buy a gun if he didn't lay off."

"If she did it, I'd like to know how Phil got the piece," Jimmy said. "Might as well just throw that tape away."

There was a long period of silence. Then Jimmy stood up.

"Have another drink," Dennis protested.

"It's late. I've got to move."

Dennis walked him to the door. "Sorry I cut out on you today, Jimmy."

"It'll be better tomorrow."

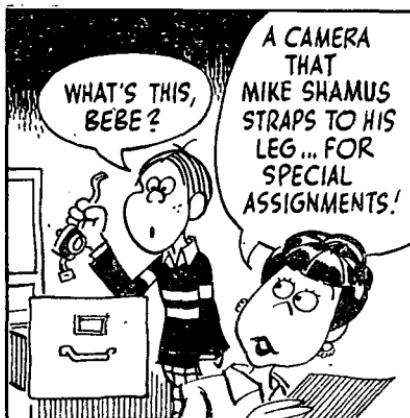
As Jimmy walked down the stairs it came to him that he'd broken the law, covered a murderer, framed a guy that didn't do it. J. Edgar wouldn't approve. But then he realized he didn't care; the hell with J. Edgar. What he'd done he'd done for Dennis, and for himself, to square the books, prove the unstoppability of 190 pounds of prime fighting cop, and it was right, no doubts whatsoever. The thought beamed like a searchlight as he walked down the stairs, Cobra 5 to Firebase Tango, the napalm's laid, roger. ●

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

What's the matter, bunky, in a quandry? Don't know what to get that hard-to-please person on your Christmas list? Well, fret no more. The nice guys at Renown Publications have solved your problem for you. Avoid the holiday traffic and the department store crowds. Get your friend a subscription to **Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine**. Where else can you get a year's entertainment so cheap? It takes six to eight weeks to get started, so you'd better do it soon. Right now would be a good time.

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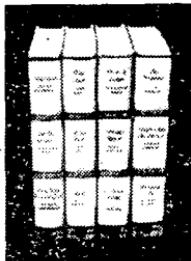
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It isn't easy living with a mystery writer, but a good wife learns to cope and even be helpful when she can!

Little Clues

by MARILYN WITTER

I TELL YOU, EVELYN, BEING MARRIED TO A WRITER is no bed of roses. It takes a special kind of person to put up with the inconveniences, but then I like to think that I am that special kind of person. You have to smooth the way for writers, Evelyn, so they can create. I keep as quiet as a little mouse when Harold is working. As soon as he stops typing, I tiptoe in and ask him, "How's it going?" and offer him a cup of coffee. It cheers him up to have me interested in what he is doing.

He told me he doesn't like to be interrupted, so I screen all his calls. Just yesterday his agent called and wanted to speak to Harold right then, but I said, "No, he's working and can't be disturbed." His agent was put out and insisted on talking to him, but I stood firm. You just can't let every Tom, Dick and Harry interrupt or he'd never get anything done.

What's his story about? Well, I ask him that all the time, but he says he's afraid of talking it all away, kind of like letting air out of a balloon, so I watch for little clues . . . yes, Evelyn you pick up words like clue when you live with a mystery writer. Anyway I try to guess what he's working on, though I can't always tell.

Remember that time last spring when I was working in the kitchen and Harold picked up the butcher knife and stabbed the rump roast just as I pulled it from the oven? I thought he'd gone crazy. He looked a little silly and mumbled something about getting into the character. As I told you then, I couldn't imagine a story about a man who stabbed a roast. I never would have guessed he was writing about Jack the Ripper.

I have to hang up now. My mother just came in. She wants to surprise Harold with a visit. She loves to tell him her ideas for stories. Bye.

WE HAD THE NICEST DAY ON SUNDAY, EVELYN. Took a ride out into the country. Harold brought along his rifle and a bunch of tin cans. After our picnic lunch, I was setting up the cans on a fence when that darn gun went off and missed me by inches. "Harold," I said, "if you can't be more careful, you can set up your own cans." He really seemed pretty upset about it all. He just came home and put his gun away.

He's fine now. Been typing all morning long. Must really be caught up in his book. I was hoping he'd get through soon, because I want to clean up in there. He asks me not to bother, but I know it makes him happy when I clear out a place so he can work. He's so messy, it's a wonder he gets anything done. Papers everywhere. As often as not, he's spilled coffee on some of them. I simply pick up all the old, stained ones and throw them out. When I'm through, his desk is no nice and neat that he jumps up and down with excitement when he sees it.

Got to run, Evelyn. He's going to the library, and this is my chance to straighten his desk. Bye.

IT'S JUST WONDERFUL, EVELYN. Harold's book is a big success. Listen to this review. "A gripping thriller. The author has authentically portrayed a psychological killer. *The Sniper* is a story you can't put down." Isn't that exciting? Harold is already working on his next novel.

Wait'll I tell you what he's done now. You know how I like to take long bubble baths. He came right into the bathroom when I was in the tub. "Harold," I said, "I'm having a bath." He just smiled at me and plugged in his new hairdryer. These men. They think women are bad, but now he's having his hair styled. I hope success hasn't gone to his head. No, Evelyn, I didn't mean that to be funny.

Anyway he dropped the fool thing right into the tub. The plug yanked out of the socket and down it went. "Now look what you've done," I said. "You could have waited until I was through. You probably ruined your dryer. What's the big hurry?" I asked him. "Your hair isn't even wet."

Well, to make up for it, he got me a nice radio and fixed a shelf over the tub so I can listen to music while I bathe.

No, Evelyn, I don't know what he's working on. I haven't noticed any little clues. Time for my bath now. Bye.



Gilbert knew the ringworms eating into his skull were the first soldiers of the devil's legions. But he mustn't give up the battle. He just had to find the right sacrifice — before it was too late!

DEVIL WORMS

by GEORGE T. ANAGNOS

GILBERT DEETERS WELL UNDERSTOOD WHY ONLY HE in the entire third grade class had to wear a ringworm cap. But he still hated it. All the other kids made fun of him. They called him *wormy* to his face, and they would move away whenever he came near. Even David, his locker mate, didn't pretend to be his friend anymore. He kept trying to squash his coat more to his side of the locker, and he had stopped putting his baseball cap in its space on the shelf next to Gilbert's. Now he just kept it crushed in his coat pocket, and he put it on after school all crumpled up. David told Gilbert that's how his older brother said all the big guys were wearing theirs. But Gilbert knew he was lying.

Sister Ann had told the class that Gilbert's *condition* was nothing to

be ashamed of and no one had to be afraid because it was under control. As long as he wore his white ringworm cap everything would get just fine very soon. Except she hadn't called him up to write on the blackboard for the past three days, and she had given Sharon a new seat because she wouldn't stop crying sitting next to Gilbert. Maybe he would just take that old valentine's card Sharon had given him in February and just tear it to little pieces and throw it at her crybaby ugly face. He hated Sharon and he hated David and he hated Sister Ann and all the other kids too. But most of all he hated his mother.

It wasn't his fault that the ringworms had defeated him. Only Gilbert knew they were the first soldiers of the devil's legions. He had battled with them and he had lost. But he would live to fight again. His mother said that he had got what he deserved since he was always filthy and wouldn't take a bath and wash his hair when she told him to and now he had shamed her with the nurse and Sister Ann and all her friends. He could still hear her evil words. *So now suffer, and I hope those little devil worms eat rapidly through your thick skull and chew up the little bit of brain you've got left.* That had really scared Gilbert.

He had gotten used to his mother hollering at him when his father wasn't home. She had begun to say mean things to him too because he was becoming *just like your worthless father.* But she shouldn't have said that about the devil worms.

The nurse had said they were all dead now and he just needed the medicine in the cap for a few days to kill any new ones that might have been hiding or sleeping. But how about if some of those hiding got away and they started to eat through his skull like the skeleton in Brother Lory's science class that they would be having next year. They would eat his brain first and then his eyes and then come crawling out of the holes where his eyes and his nose used to be. That's probably what they were doing right now. His head was beginning to itch everywhere and he just had to scratch it even though the nurse had said not to. Maybe no one would see.

Sister Ann, Sister Ann, Gilbert is scratching his head again! It was that Creepy Linda that had caught him. The biggest squealer in the class. She probably was one of the devil's legions assigned to watch him all the time so they could catch him and get him locked up so he wouldn't have a chance to fight back. Gilbert turned toward her seat in the fourth row by the window. All the class was now looking at him. He gave her a hateful look and then pretended to quickly scratch something from his head and to throw it at her. Everybody screamed, and Linda jumped up, brushing herself all over, while repeating the word *disgusting* with every wave of her arm.

Gilbert, your behavior is becoming very trying. Sister Ann always found things trying before she punished somebody. I'm afraid there will be no recess for you today, and if you scratch your head again or cause any more commotion, I'll have to send you to Brother Williams. Gilbert wasn't afraid of Brother Williams, even though he was a really mean principal and they said he used the rubber hose on the bigger kids. He was facing much worse enemies than Brother Williams. But Gilbert knew if he got sent to the principal's office, then they'd call his mother and she'd lock him up and not let him out all weekend. He had to be free this weekend because he had finally figured out a plan. He was going to get even with everybody and at the same time defeat all the forces of evil that were up against him and his father.

Sister Ann seemed to remember one more thing to say. Just try to remember, Gilbert, that if you scratch your head you're going to cut open the lesions and spread infection instead of letting everything heal. Just be a big boy and keep your hands on your desk in front of you. The rest of you should pay attention to your reading lesson. And that includes you, Gilbert.

Who could pay attention to their reading lesson with devil worms crawling inside their head? Gilbert pretended to be reading while he worked out in his mind how he would show them all this weekend. He tried not to think about the pieces of his brain that were being eaten little by little this very minute. He blinked his eyes rapidly in case one of them was about to try to eat through his eye. Maybe they'd retreat if they saw a big hairy chopping lid closing down on them.

THEY HAD SHAVED OFF ALL HIS HAIR and put on a lot of medicine before making him wear the white ringworm cap. Even after he could stop wearing the cap in one more week he would still be called *baldy-head* by everyone and they would keep calling him *wormy* forever. So what. He didn't care. They would all pay. He might be only a nine-year-old kid, but he wasn't a dummy. His father had even said so.

He isn't a dummy, I mean, he simply thinks on a different track than most kids. Anyway it's not really very strange to like to play in dirt and not want to take baths. I was the same way when I was a kid. He'll get over this little unfortunate ringworm infection before we know it. Besides, he has a strong imagination and someday he'll be a great inventor or architect or something. We just have to tone down this fascination with devils and dragons and things before he scares himself half to death. Maybe I've just been giving him the wrong books to read.

Gilbert's mother never let a chance go by without a sharp stab at his

father about his drinking. *Maybe it's that those creatures are just his substitute for a father that's hardly ever conscious. Although I think he's probably just inherited your alcoholic feeble-mindedness.* And she was stabbing deeper and deeper as the days went by. His father's only answer in the past few weeks was to go and start drinking even sooner than usual. This was the first time in a long time he had said so much, but it was only because she had pushed Gilbert with his ring-worm cap in front of him as soon as he came in the door.

She'd try and get to him right when he came home from work when he was still able to feel some pain. It would usually be something about Gilbert and how if he was a decent father, his kid wouldn't be such a mess, having to go to a broken-down Catholic school instead of a real private school and running around filthy all the time. And now his son was really going off the deep end racing through the house with his muddy shoes because the devil was after him for failing to bring him the right sacrifices.

Gilbert wondered what his mother hollered about before they had him and if his father had always been a lush like she used to tell him in all their fights, when he used to fight back. It was Saturday afternoon and he was home alone with his father. His mother had left early to do her Christmas shopping. His father sat in his big easy chair and was pouring some more drink into his glass.

You'd never believe, Gilly Boy, what a beautiful woman she was when I first met her. I fell in love with her the first moment I saw her. That of course was my undoing. I married her and cashed in the free spirit that had been my reason for living. It wasn't her fault, I guess, but I could never go off again to fight those glorious crusades to rescue the wonderful holy lands from the devils and infidels. Instead, I began fighting for the greenback-a-dollar that I never did give a hang about and that I'd never get enough of in any case to satisfy her version of the good life. It took me eleven long years to discover that it didn't matter how much money I made. She'd never be satisfied, not unless I truly sold my soul to the devil and became willing to destroy everyone in my path to get to the very top. I guess that's when I decided to hell with it all. Now don't you ever go repeating what I'm tellin' you, Gilly Boy, you hear? This is just between you and me, like real soldiers of the cross you and I.

Gilbert didn't like his father calling him *Gilly Boy*. He knew that when he started using that name it meant he was already drunk again and he wasn't really going to pay any attention to him, just go on talking about things without really being there, not even looking at him

anymore. But Gilbert always still listened.

You're a smart kid, Gilly Boy. I know you understand everything I say, so I'm not worried about your repeating anything to your mother. It kinda bothers me to see that she's starting to take things out on you too these days. I guess she figures she's had her disappointment with one crazy romantic, she sure doesn't need another. Except I don't know what kind of a brave knight you are, Gilly Boy, if you don't go fighting it out with them dragons, or devils, that are supposed to be chasing you all over the place. When I was a boy, we'd whip the hell out of all them demons if they tried to mess with us. Yeah, we sure would, 'cause we were real crusaders then. But I guess they've finally come back to get their due. They're not after you, Gilly Boy, those devils are after me now. I can see them closing in on me too. They figure this old smouldering knight is nearly burned out anyway, why not grab him and dump him into the flaming pit where he can still feed the fires with his dying and well-spirited breath.

Gilbert turned up the TV volume as he sat a foot away concentrating now on teleporting himself into the picture on the screen. He didn't want to hear his father's voice anymore coming from that smelly old stuffed chair with all those empty bottles lying around it. He was happy to hear the sound of swallowing again. He especially didn't want to hear about those devils coming to take his father away. He knew it was his fault they were closing in on him.

He hadn't been able yet to get them the sacrifice they wanted. They had even chased Gilbert and tried to brand him with the mark of the upside-down-cross that would make him their slave forever. But he had got away. Only the ringworms had defeated him, but only because he had to fight them without his new sword. Now for sure the demons were going to get his father and burn him and he would be the last crusader trying to remove all the evil armies from the holy lands, and without the genuine Toledo sword that his father had promised him for Christmas.

GILBERT HAD TRIED VERY HARD EARLIER IN THE DAY to get everything set for the perfect sacrifice. It was the Sabbath again and he had planned to make a very special offering for this week's black mass. The devil's legions had been having one every single Saturday now, ever since his father stopped fighting back. Time was running out. He knew they had made the pact with his mother and were trying this very minute to make her wish come true. He had to offer them something they wanted more than her soul. Otherwise Gilbert was sure his father wouldn't make it home from work on Monday. Tuesday was

Christmas. Gilbert needed the Toledo sword to fight the legions of hell and chase them out of the Holy lands and rescue his father from their terrible burning fires. The final attack was coming now, and his mother wasn't even hiding her secret pact anymore. Before she went out, she had even told his father her evil wish right to his face.

You're nothing but a complete lush, Paul. Death would look a lot better on you than that drunken stupor. I don't know how I could ever have married you when I had dozens of the most eligible men after me. You know, Paul, you didn't start downhill after losing out on that Department head job. You've always been a nothing. You have never been able to provide decently for me and just one dumb child. All you've ever given me is shame. And all you've given that boy of yours is crazy ideas about holy lands and crusading idiots.

I'm sick and tired of watching you come home each night for over two months and just sit in your stenchy chair and do nothing but fill your guts with that poison and keep filling that fool kid's head with your crazy dreams. He's become just like you now, and even worse, because he hasn't burned his brains out like you have, but he already acts as demented as you do. I really can't stand it any longer. I don't care anymore what my father or my sisters are going to say. They were so painfully right about my throwing away my education and background on a loser like you. Well, I just can't keep living this horrible lie for them. I just can't take living with you anymore!

I'm going to leave you, Paul. Do you hear me? Do you hear me, you burned out nothing?! OK. OK. Keep sitting there like you're completely dead to the world. But maybe you'll have a drop of manhood left to do me one last small favor. Listen to me, Paul. You can save me the shame of going back to my father to get away from a burned-out, nothing husband. Why don't you just drop dead next time you go out and never show your drunken face again? Why don't you do that for us, Paul? Why don't you give your Gilly Boy and me a real Christmas present for once in your worthless life?

GILBERT HAD NEVER DOUBTED THE PACT HAD BEEN MADE. The Band-Aid on his mother's finger told him that she had signed it in blood. There could be no turning back from the trade for her soul in exchange for his father's death. Gilbert had already sacrificed in the past three Sabbaths a hundred million ants, soaking them with a can of cigarette lighter fluid and setting them on fire as they fought their holy wars, and even spraying the liquid flame on them like bolts of lightning shooting down from heaven. But the millions of ants had still not been enough to quench the blood thirst of the devils. They had

even laughed at him when at first he had offered them the caterpillars wrapped in dry leaves and burning on both ends. They had smelled a lot worse too.

Gilbert's insect offerings were all made for one urgent purpose, to get him into the one place his father had said that demons could be defeated. Into the devil's own altar, the blood-drenched Inner Sanctum. Once inside, he would instantly attack with his hidden sword, even if he was forced to use only the wooden one he had made himself. With the power of the angels on his side, he was sure he would destroy every evil soldier of the devil's legions.

It was in the horrible Inner Sanctum that the demons danced and drank and got drunk on the blood of the sacrifices brought to them by their slaves and by the other fallen ones who came to worship at the devil's altar. Only after drinking would they be weak enough to be slain like sleeping dragons. They would be dead to the world then, and Gilbert knew he could kill them real easy. He didn't even care anymore that he had lost the fight against the ringworms. They couldn't get through his skull anyway. They couldn't eat through because it was made of pure white marble, like the altar in St. Michael's, where he used to be an altar boy until his mother stopped taking him one Sunday. His head had been blessed many times by Father Dawson and it could still ward off all evil even if it hadn't been blessed for quite a while.

His mother had said it was all superstitious nonsense and she had had her fill of it. She wouldn't attend that decrepit, little church anymore even if it meant they'd throw Gilbert out of their raunchy, petty school. He would just have to take his chances on surviving in the public schools if that's all his worthless father was capable of providing for him. It wasn't her religion anyway. It was his, and if he wasn't going to be sober enough on weekends anymore to attend on his alternate Sundays, she sure wouldn't be the only one to go sit there every week and watch them make their paganistic body and blood offerings on the sacrificial altar.

Gilbert had asked the demons to trust him to come through. They only had to switch their black mass just this one time. He had promised them a perfect sacrifice if they held their mass tomorrow, on Sunday the Christian Sabbath. He had even set a great big purple beatle on fire as an offering for them to just listen. But once more they had chased him for daring to interrupt their mass without a worthy sacrifice, and they would have caught and branded him for sure this time if he hadn't thrown the holy water at them that he had been given at

St. Michael's and had kept for an emergency just like this one. There was no way now that he could even get close to the Inner Sanctum during the rest of today's evil mass. The perfect sacrifice that he could offer only on Sunday would be too late if the devils were no longer there to dance and drink and get drunk while he waited to destroy them. Gilbert sat in front of the TV shaking, with steamy tears building up in his eyes.

Say, Gilly Boy, I've been thinking about your mother's asking me for a last little favor. She may have hit upon something that makes some sense for a change. What the hell. They don't need pure-hearted crusaders anymore. When was the last time they had a holy crusade anyway? I bet you can't remember it, Gilly Boy. It must have been before your time. Maybe it was before my time too. Maybe long before my time. Maybe I've just been the total dreamy fool Ilean says I am.

How could I have spent all those years working like a blind idiot to keep climbing that wretched ladder of success for nothing more than worthless money and empty positions? There was never any chance of my making good in that putrid system. How could I not have seen that from the very beginning?

I was always aware that there was a difference between me and the others. That devil-worshipping Barrows is the only type of animal cut out for that jungle. Not me. Sure, he made Department Head and I didn't. But you know something, Gilly Boy, I'm damn glad I didn't. They knocked me off the track I was steaming along on like a blind engine, with Ilean always pushing hard behind me, making sure it was only that one track I stayed on. If something didn't lead to more money and more power, forget it. Don't waste your time giving anyone a helping hand. Don't stop to question what you're doing. Don't look for any different roads. Just plow on down the track. 'I've told you a thousand times, Paul, trains don't stop for cows crossing their paths, otherwise, they'd never get anywhere.' Except people aren't cows. And the only place that track leads is to nowhere.

They think I've slacked off my work lately because I've picked up this drinking problem and they're going to ride with me for a while, since I've been such a loyal hard-working shlump, till I get myself straightened out. Well, I've got news for them. I don't have a drinking problem. Not as far as they're concerned anyway. I was dead sober when I decided to chuck it all. I can't stand doing their meaningless work anymore. Who will ever care, five hundred years from now, if Consolidated General ever met its annual production goals? Just answer me that, Gilly Boy. I don't need them. I don't want them. They

can all go to hell and back with their money, their positions, and the constant humiliations you have to go through to climb every step of their power ladder. All I want, all I've ever wanted, is a chance to chase . . . the rainbows. I know they're real, if you believe in them enough. I want to go off, free from these spirit-sapping chains, off to those adventures that hold the glory of eternal things. To great crusades. With hundreds, thousands of noble knights. Fighting the holy wars that settle the course of vast civilizations for centuries to come.

But first I've got to burn out their devils, Gilly Boy. They've come in all their wicked splendor into the inner sanctum of my mind's altar with every unholy and foul offering. They captured my soul and they've held it for over a decade. I can see they don't plan to let me escape their evil grasp, not without some heavy pain. When I stop pouring in this liquid flame, their power returns. And then I can hear her voice so clear. She's made her pact with them, I know, to throw me back into that pit of fire. I need a noble knight to slay forevermore those flaming dragons. He'll need a Toledo sword made especially to fight the infidels. But we just may have to first make a small sacrifice to give that sword its temper . . . We may just have to first destroy a brief, corrupt body before I can free my eternal soul . . . We may have to fight fire with fire . . .

GILBERT WAS STILL LISTENING FOR SOME TIME after his father had stopped talking. His loud snoring had begun to sound like a dragon snorting red flames through its green nostrils. If only his father could turn into a huge and horrible dragon and destroy his mother when she came home. Then the devil's pact would be over because there'd be nothing left to trade with. She'd be dead and her soul would already have gone straight to hell to pay for all her evil schemes and her corrupt ways. It would only take a minute for him to jump on her and knock her down and tear out her heart and then lop off her head with one swoop of his terrible swift sword. Then he could change back and they would be free to go together to fight the holy crusades with all the other noble knights.

Except Gilbert knew it would never happen unless he could first kill all the demons protecting her. But he could only offer them the perfect sacrifice tomorrow, and their black mass would be ending tonight. There had to be something he could do. He couldn't think straight anymore. The devil worms must have eaten out most of his brains already. If there was only some way before it became too late. This was sure the time when he could use the help of Waldo the Wandering Wise Wizard that he had met at last year's Christmas Bingo Bazaar.

Oh! Of course! Oh, how stupid could he be! The thought of the bazaar must have come from an angel's touch! He had completely forgotten the Christmas Bingo Bazaar that would be held again this year. This time it was going to be all day Sunday in St. Michael's Hall! His mother's big-deal reading of the announcement he had brought home from school a few weeks ago came back like a flash of holy lightning to the rescue.

Can you believe such a hypocritical, insulting message! Here are your favorite church fathers, Paul, with their latest display of religious ceremony overwhelming substance, which their feeble minds are probably incapable of recognizing. On the one hand, they tell you that you've got a holy, sacred obligation to go to church every Sunday. On the other, they remind you that you can do your official, formal, mindless duty on Saturday just as well, dear obedient flock. It's really all the same with us body and blood folks, especially since we've got a big bingo game planned for Sunday that'll be taking up all our precious time.

So not only are your friends once again holding their normal five o'clock get-a-jump-on-your-Sunday-duty service the Saturday before Christmas, but they're asking all the school children and parents to definitely plan to go to the Saturday evening mass because there just won't be time to even hold as service that special Sunday. The all-day Christmas Bingo Bazaar, after all, is the real biggy that pays the electric bills. Well, this is one mass I plan to attend again, just to finally give Father Dawson and his two-bit cronies a piece of my mind when it's over. I've had it up to here with this simple-minded, insult of a church.

AS GILBERT QUICKLY HURRIED TOWARD ST. MICHAEL'S with the charcoal lighter fluid can in a bag under his arm, he was feeling thankful that his mother had said she'd go directly to church from shopping so she could get a seat away from those drafts that came through the cracked wall boards, which she also planned to complain about to Father Dawson. From the three-fifteen showing on his watch, he decided he had plenty of time to prepare the place for burning, to start the offering when everyone showed up for church, and to destroy the demons after they let him into their Inner Sanctum to receive his perfect sacrifice. He'd go back home then and wake his father and know he'd be all right, forever. And if his mother, after losing all her devil protectors, somehow made it home alive, he was sure she'd never say another evil word again, just out of being afraid of what Sir Gilbert might do the next time.

Dying can be difficult, but sometimes living can be even more painful!

DOUBLE BURDEN

by SANDRA WIGGINS STANGE

GOODBYE, GRANDPA, I'M GOING TO MISS YOU TERRIBLY. Through my tear-glazed eyes I can see your coffin sinking with funeral dignity into its waiting pit, but I don't want to believe you're actually gone. Do you know how many friends have gathered to mourn your passing?

Oh, Grandpa, you were the delight of my childhood. "Little Meg" you always called me — instead of that hateful "Maggie." You indulged my taste for ice cream, took me on adventurous treasure-seeking walks, told me magic stories. And when I grew older we shared long, satisfying conversations. Remember? You never knew, though, that I also shared your secret.

My memory of that day is unclouded by the passing of twenty-five years. School classes were over, and I went by to spend the rest of the afternoon with Gran. God, how I dreaded it! She wasn't really my beloved Gran anymore, but a poor wretched shell of a creature torn by pain. At eighteen I was ill-equipped to deal with life's cruelties.

The nurse you'd hired to help was busy in the kitchen so I went straight upstairs to Gran's room. When I heard voices, I stopped outside the door.

Gran was whimpering pitifully. "Jason, please, help me. The pain — it's so bad. Please, Jason." Just breathing took all her strength.

You scared me, grandpa, when you started to cry. It was such a dreadful, groaning sound. You said, "I can't do it, Mandy. I just can't."

She really begged you then. "Jason, please, if you love me, do it. I can't bear anymore." Through the crack in the door I could see her frail hand groping for yours.

Oh, Grandpa, I couldn't move. I didn't mean to spy, but my feet

seemed to have suddenly grown roots. A frightening dizziness blurred my view of you hesitating, then holding that pillow so tenderly over Gran's face for what seemed an eternity. You kept whispering over and over, "God forgive me, God forgive me."

Grandpa, I stole quickly down the stairs and out of the house; nobody ever knew I was there that day. The nurse — Mrs. Owens, wasn't it? — found Gran later. "She just passed away in her sleep, poor soul," she told every one. "It's truly a blessing her suffering is over."

Your suffering, though, wasn't finished, was it, Grandpa? You carried on so bravely. Helping others became your whole life. But I could always see the shadow of that special heart-deep ache far back in your eyes. I silently shared your double burden of grief and guilt all these years because I loved you so.

NOW, GRANDPA, I MUST CARRY OUR BURDEN ALONE. Our sharing is finally complete, isn't it? Only *you* could understand how it broke my heart to do what you asked the other day in your hospital room. But I did it! Your quiet strength so long ago gave me courage to push the pillow into your pain-ravaged face and end your anguish forever. Goodbye, Grandpa. Rest in peace. ●

Mike Shayne Mystery Makers

BONNIE RAUSCHER (*Forget-Me-Not*) says:

I am a 26-year-old graduate student at UC Berkeley in paleontology, writing a master's thesis on an extinct Australian marsupial. I have one husband, one cat, and at least 3000 books. I've been reading mysteries since elementary school and wrote my first novel (abysmal) at 14. Other interests include history, poetry, museums, fantasy, bridge, travel.

The Big D was ready to deal for the Big Bucks, but he wasn't about to let these turkeys trick him. Yet if Tech could come up with the promised goods, this superstar would be wearing garnet and gold.

Welcome to the Big Leagues

by HAL CHARLES

WE GOT RHONDA'S CALL ABOUT THE LAST-MINUTE CHANGE in plans just in time to meet Flight 207 from Chicago. It wasn't difficult to pick out Darrell Crosse. At six feet, eleven inches, his face in the distance resembled a pale balloon bobbing along above the deplaning crowd. The kid was decked out in one of those three-piece suits open at the collar and enough chains around his neck to keep the Marquis de Sade in stock. He already looked like the millionaire he would become, except for one thing — he was wearing Converse Allstars.

My business partner John — he's the flashy dresser — caught the kid's eye and stuck out his hand, ready to run through the ritual shake. But the kid just stared down at him as though my partner were a Moonie or something. John turned back to me. I simply shrugged my shoulders.

Finally the kid shook his head and said, "Hey, if you want me to play, you got to pay."

Welcome to the dirty business of college recruiting. I stuffed a twenty into my hand, and the kid shook it like a smiling loan shark. "Gen-tle-men," he said, pumping our hands in turn, "now Darrell is ready to deal."

JOHN TOOK THE KID'S LEATHER BAG WITH THE UNC INITIALS (no doubt a small token from that school's boosters), and we headed through the terminal. Just as we got to the automated doors, a page sounded for the kid.

"Hey, somebody wants the Big D."

Shuffling him out the door, I told him, "We put the page in a little while ago, in case we didn't spot you getting off the plane."

"Actually," John chimed in, "we wanted everybody to know we've got a high-school All-American visiting Tech."

The kid bought it.

"All right! You guys think of everything."

John handed him a token pair of sunglasses and we stepped outside. The afternoon sun, having already burned away the smog, was starting to work on the tarmac. As we walked toward a gold Mercedes with a garnet interior and the big license plate ACES-2, the kid smiled. "They told me you coast dudes had it together. I like it, a car in the school's colors."

The kid had actually read, or been read, the school's brochure.

"Car belongs to the football coach," said John, taking off his madras sportscoat that would have humbled Heywood Broun. I wish I could have taken mine off.

"Yeah," I added. "Basketball's number one here at Tech. We drive ACES-1."

The three of us crossed the steaming lot to the corner. As I unlocked the Ford sedan, the kid started laughing in a high-pitched tone. "This is ACES-1? I pass up an expense-paid trip to an all-star game, I fly all the way out to the coast, and you want to haul the Big D around in a Ford." Shaking his head, he continued, "Down in Carolina they know how to treat a superstar. I get picked up in a block-long limo with two cheerleaders as seatcovers."

Thinking quickly, I said, "Down in Carolina their car's not in the shop."

"We promise you, things'll get better," John added, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Unfortunately the car's air-conditioner was on the blink again, but the freeway monoxide probably reminded our visitor of home.

The kid stretched out his long legs between the front bucket seats. "Things could be worse," he said, rattling his chains. "You might not have gotten my last-minute call that I'd be in on an earlier flight."

"No sweat," I told him.

"My girl friend, Rhonda, works in the athletic office," said John. "She let me know the moment you phoned."

"Right on! Say, either of you dudes smoke?"

I tossed the athlete my pack of Marlboros:

"Smoke!" The kid let out with that hyena laugh again. "I mean mary jane, a roach, you know, dope. After that flight I've got to mellow out."

"Listen, Darrell, you don't think guys in our position would take a chance on being caught with a ballplayer and drugs," I said.

"This is a rough enough business," said John, "without the police."

THE KID SETTLED FOR A TRIP THROUGH MARLBORO country. Turning off the freeway, I pointed the Ford toward the mountains and silently hit the cassette button.

John unknotted his silk tie and picked up the cue. "What we want to know, Darrell, is simple — where does Tech stand on your list?"

"Right at the top. When Coach Redfield made his visit, the two of us did a little negotiating — in private. Why else would I even consider a school like Tech. You guys haven't cracked the top twenty in my lifetime." The kid untied his sneakers. "But you know that."

"Yeah," I said, "what we don't know is how our offer stacks up against the others."

"Well, that Ohio school can't compete — I mean, a condo with an ocean view. And nobody wants to drive a convertible, any convertible, through a Michigan winter." The kid took his sneakers off, and I thought John was going to get sick. "Coach Redfield assured me the Tech Booster Club has a big enough slush fund to buy back my four complimentary tickets at twenty times their face value. And first-class plane fare for my parents to see a few home games was the icing."

"You're worth a lot of money to a lot of people, Darrell."

The kid lit up another butt, took a long drag on it, then flipped it out the window at some ponderosa pine. "Thirty-four points, fifteen boards, toss in a few blocked shots, a few assists. No wonder the Chi press calls me 'The Next Bill Walton.' Confidentially, guess who contacted the Big D last week? Auerbach, Red Auerbach of the Celtics. Wants me to jump right into the pros. But don't worry — if Tech can deliver the promised goods, I'll be wearing garnet and gold."

With all the hot air the kid was blowing off, I hardly noticed the cool-

ness from the mountains.

"Hey," said the kid sitting up, "I thought from the pictures Coach Redfield sent me Tech was downtown. What's with all the trees and hills?"

I flipped off the cassette. "You'll be staying up here for awhile."

"You know," added John, "you seen one college campus, you seen them all."

"You're gonna put me up at one of those country estates. Swimming pools, tennis courts, and a little female com-pan-ion-ship. *That* the Big D can dig."

THE KID WAS SHOWING ME A COPY OF THE SPORTS Illustrated article on him when we pulled up at the cabin. The kid shot up so fast he almost gave the Ford a sunroof. "What is this place? I should have known," he said, ramming his feet back into the Converse. "You only give me a Jackson at the airport, try to roast me in this beat-up wreck. YOU PHONIES! You tried to trick me, get my name on the national letter of intent before I knew what Tech was really like."

This was the part of the business I disliked most. I popped out the tape..

"Did you get everything the kid said?" John asked.

I held up the cassette.

The kid did a double-take. "Tape! You mean you taped everything I've been saying?"

"Come on, Darrell," I interrupted. "Let's go."

"Wait a minute," the kid returned, refusing to budge his two-hundred and ten pound frame. "I just figured out who you two are. I've heard you turkeys would pull any trick to get what you want. You're investigators for the NCAA trying to get Tech for recruiting violations, and you brought me up here to try to sweat the evidence out of me."

"Kid, with a brain like yours," John said, "it's a good thing you can play basketball."

The Big D was speechless.

"Hold it, partner," I said. "The kid may have an idea there. If after hearing the kid say he wants to come to Tech Coach Redfield won't dip into the slush fund to get back his prize recruit, he'll sure as hell shell out to keep the tape away from the NCAA."

The color drained from his face, the kid just started sobbing. "You mean you're . . . kidnappers?"

I reached inside my coat and pulled out the .38. "You were talking about playing with the pros. Well, kid, welcome to the big leagues." ●

WAIT FOR ME

by THOMAS DWYER

THE WARDEN HAD ME BROUGHT UP TO HIS OFFICE and told me my Old Man was dead.

"Burial will be the day after tomorrow," said the Warden. "You'll be permitted to attend the funeral."

They sent a couple of guards in civilian clothes with me. All the way down in the bus I kept thinking of the Old Man. He'd been a tall guy and had worked for the Gas Company, walked with an arthritic limp, and spent a lot of time out at my mother's grave. He wasn't perfect. He'd get his load on and couldn't keep away from the corner bookee; he made a lot of promises he didn't keep, but he wasn't the kind to go in for yelling, or swatting, or busting up the furniture like a lot of other guys in the neighborhood.

The Funeral Parlor was in a private house. We went up the steps to the porch and opened the door. The Directory on the wall read *Daniel Dallas — Room A*

They had held the funeral up waiting for me. The pall-bearers were down at the end of the hall having a smoke. They still had the lid off the coffin so I could say "good-bye."

The mourners, mostly relatives, were sitting along the wall in straight-back chairs, and when I walked into the room the whispering stopped and everybody looked away, or at the floor, or at the cards pinned to the flowers. Then one of them got up and came toward me; it was my sister Julie. She had a handkerchief in one hand, and it had a black border, and it was wet. Her lips were pulled tight and thin and she wouldn't have had a smile for me even if we hadn't been in a Funeral Parlor.

"He kept asking for you," she said.

"What happened?"

"Uremia."

I knelt down on the prayer bench, at the head of the coffin. They had the Old Man all rouged up and his hair combed like an old-time

bartender, and you could see the stitches holding his lips together. I said a couple of prayers. It didn't take long because I didn't know most of the words. Then I got up and walked towards an empty chair, and the people sitting next to it stood up and moved away. A big guy with a bald head came to me, my Uncle Larry, and he bent down to me and talked low like he didn't want my Old Man to hear.

"You got a lot of nerve coming here," he said.

"He was my father."

"Don't talk bad of the dead," he said.

My sister Julie hurried to us and shook her head, and Uncle Larry glared at me and walked fast out into the hall.

THEY SAVED A PLACE FOR ME IN THE FIRST LIMOUSINE, but of course, there was no room for the guards so we had to take a cab. It was a long ride and the cabbie kept his lights on to show he was part of the cavalcade. After about an hour we began to run alongside trees and hedges and a black iron fence. The cemetery.

We turned into the entrance and there was a circle and right in the center was a fieldstone Chapel with its bells swinging, and off to the side was a small pond crowded with water lilies which moved in the breeze like they were treading water. We rode down along the cemetery road. The sprinklers were on and you could smell the grass and the newly turned earth.

They had a canopy set up at the side of the grave and the Minister was standing there in a black robe, and as we walked up, he put on his glasses and began to read from the Bible. The pall-bearers came down the path. They had the coffin covered with a mat of artificial grass, but the mat stuck up on one side and you could see the silver handle.

The Minister said a lot of nice things about my Old Man, and there were tears and sobs, and then it was over. We started to walk back to the cars, and I looked over my shoulder. They had the coffin in a pair of straps and were lowering it into the grave.

Up on the road I stood at the open door of the cab. The rest of the mourners stayed down a ways with their backs turned. My sister Julie broke away from the group and came running to me.

"Goodbye, Daniel."

"Goodbye," I said. Julie turned and was gone, and me and the guards got into the cab and closed the door.

We got back to the prison late in the afternoon. In a little while the Sergeant of the Guard came down to my cell and asked what I wanted for supper.

It was the last one.

*Warminhall hesitated with the life-saving pills.
Whose fault would it be if The Golden Boy died?
Certainly not his. He'd tried, but it was just too late.
He waited a few more minutes, just to be sure . . .*

GOLDEN BOY

by GARY ALEXANDER

CHAMPAGNE, BOUILLABAISSE, AND PLATITUDES FLOWED
in quantity the night Leon (Father Time) Schinkel retired. For the last

nine years, Schinkel was Southern Zone marketing manager. Ed (Steady Eddie) Warminhall had the Northern Zone. Until recently he believed that the old geezer was going to hang on forever.

“Bravo!”

“Cheers!”

“Another toast!”

“A job well done!” Warminhall chimed in, giddy from alcohol and his own adrenaline, coming down hard on the “done.”

The following morning, about the time Schinkel broke ground for Scottsdale, Warminhall brought his proposal for filling the vacancy to his boss, Alan (Gray Fox) Barrett, senior vice-president in charge of administration. Warminhall had prepared it weeks ago.

Gray Fox scanned Warminhall’s neatly-bound reports and graphs, saying, “Impressive, Eddie, and it has its points, but the job is too much for any one person.”

Seemed that everyone in Home Office had a nickname, Warminhall thought. He despised his own, reading “steady” as a euphemism for: plodding, inflexible, unimaginative, reliable but mediocre. Was this Gray Fox’s message now?

“But, Alan,” Warminhall protested. “See, right here on the flow chart I made, putting all of Marketing under me with two assistant managers gives us fifty percent more management control, and relieves you of some of the burden too.”

Barrett shook his head firmly, the gray locks fluttering over his ears. He had effected that hair-style after leaving his wife for a Braniff stewardess.

“No, Eddie. Especially now. We’re one of the largest industrial fastener manufacturers and distributors in the nation now, and since we stuck a toe into the aviation and marine markets, we have a real shot at *numero uno*. We’re got a smooth ride going, Eddie. We’re hitting passing gear on an uphill grade, so to speak. The structure shall remain as is for the present. I’m calling Judd Thaxter up from Denver to take the Southern Zone.”

Warminhall’s knuckles whitened around one of his leatherette binders. Thaxter, the Golden Boy! Warminhall knew he was a comer, but he was only thirty-five or so, if that, easily ten years younger than himself.

Warminhall knew The Golden Boy personally only from quarterly management seminars, but all reports pegged him as an intelligent, sensitive, workaholic who accepted arbitrary transfers cheerfully. His rapid ascent had been accomplished without a trace of connivance or backbiting and yet he was still considered future boardroom material.

Warminhall doubted if he could get along with someone so eccentric and devious.

"Well, Alan, I'd be the last one to dispute a top management decision, and while Judd is a fine lad, I wonder if he's a bit green to be playing in the major leagues."

Gray Fox regarded him with eyes as steely as his hair. "I recall you being not much more than a pup when you came up, Eddie."

Gray Fox had him there. Seven years ago, whisked out of Omaha to his present position. Seven years without a promotion. The Peter Principle? Steady Eddie.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm counting on you to break him in, Eddie. Help him through the rookie jitters."

AS IF JUDD THAXTER HAD ROOKIE JITTERS! He looked like a Golden Boy: tall, blonde, with sincere blue eyes. Same with his wife. They reminded Warminhall of a Scandinavian figure-skating team. Warminhall assisted them in finding a house and a preschool for their equally-Nordic children.

Thaxter was a natural. He caught on to the job as if he had been doing it for years. He played racquetball in the company gym, losing acceptably and convincingly to Gray Fox, splitting his matches to the stout, older, red-faced Warminhall although Ed knew the kid could whip him with his eyes closed, and crushing lower-management opponents. At company functions, he could drink with the best of them, never coming close to throwing up or passing out. All this was done in utter sincerity, without a hint of malice or personal gain.

Judd Thaxter became Warminhall's "best friend." His former best friend and assistant manager, L.J. (The Rock) Packard, who was even older and less promotable than Warminhall, was transferred to Thaxter's Zone. Warminhall's new assistant, Skip (The Barracuda) Hillmyer, who came up from Fort Worth, could be no one's best friend. Hillmyer had the wet look and piercing eyes, and was even younger than Thaxter.

Warminhall suspected that The Barracuda had majored in the Borgia Period and the Stalinist purges in college. He strutted about like a Hitler Youth alumnus. He relished in his nickname.

"At this level, Ed," The Barracuda told him, "you can get things done. A lot of people in this company aren't pulling their weight. At Home Office you can really sink your teeth into some flab, if need be."

"I'll send out for some raw meat, Skippy. That should tide you over for awhile," he answered casually, hating himself for hating and fear-

ing The Barracuda as much as he hated and feared rivals and superiors, like The Golden Boy and Gray Fox.

NOTHING UNTOWARD HAPPENED TO WARMINHALL, however, until a month following the breakup, when Gray Fox invited him for a drink after work. Warminhall stewed over it all day, aware that Gray Fox did not drink with the boys any more; the little cookie from Braniff exhausted all his off-duty time and energy.

As he suspected, he was not being given a pat on the back or a bonus. Grat Fox slid a letter over to Warminhall's cocktail napkin.

"It's lucky this was routed to Judd's shop by mistake. You were out of the office at the time. Biggie Baker over at Amalgamated Aircraft was running at the red line. Judd called him and got him down from the ceiling, though."

Warminhall read, muttering to himself, "The A-603 alloy flush rivet. Ten thousand gross were shipped instead of a hundred thousand. Damn! Goddamn clerical error, lopping off a digit!"

Gray Fox signalled the bartender for another round. "A typing mistake isn't the point, Eddie. This is a new account, our first major penetration into commercial aviation. If there's a moral to this story, it's that we have to keep a tight handle on every aspect of the program, put out the fires before they rage out of control. Am I out of line bringing this to your attention, Eddie, despite the fact that the fault lies with some young lady's spastic fingers?"

"No, Alan, you're not."

"Biggie is concerned that such snafus may delay the projected inaugural flight of the RC-82 prototype. Was I correct in assuring Biggie that he had no cause for alarm?"

"Yes, sir."

WARMINHALL DIDN'T GET OUT OF THE BAR UNTIL PAST six-thirty. He put the verbal whip to the cabbie, urging him back to the office. He had to pull all the invoices and correspondence on Amalgamated tonight, having a full schedule tomorrow. Get a handle on it, Steady Eddie. If you don't, Thaxter will, steadily usurping your Zone until you have a territory the size of a Rhode Island suburb. Then he will be overall marketing manager, hardly what you had in mind with your abortive proposal.

And damn it, he knew that when Thaxter brought the Amalgamated problem to Gray Fox's attention, treachery was the last thing on his mind. The Golden Boy was thinking only of the company's welfare. That's what made it so senseless!

Warminhall arrived and saw a light on in Thaxter's office. Par for the course! Warminhall peeked to say a cheery hello and perhaps make a small joke about sweat-shop conditions.

Thaxter was hunched over his desk, gasping for air, slipping a capsule into his mouth with a shaky hand. Warminhall froze, staring. In a moment, Thaxter had recovered well enough to sit back and speak.

"Please keep this under your hat, Ed. Nobody here knew. My heart."

"My God, man! Heart trouble in your thirties?"

"I won't be thirty until November. It runs in the family. I've been on medication for a year, since it was detected."

Thaxter's breathing normalized. "Please, Ed. If word gets out, it's all over for me here."

Warminhall slumped into depression, deep and fast. Not yet thirty! The Golden Boy was *fifteen* years younger than him.

"Mum's the word, Judd."

Thaxter broke into a toothpaste-commercial smile. "You're a helluva guy, Ed. Did you come back up to clean up your desk, too?"

"Uh, no. I just forgot my house key. See you in the morning, Judd."

WARMINHALL, OF COURSE COULD NOT RUN TO GRAY FOX with a report of Thaxter's medical condition. One, he had given Judd his word. Secondly, his enthusiasm would have been difficult to conceal; he would have comported himself like an obvious and hopeful ghoul. Instead, he broke the news over coffee to Skip Hillmyer, *The Barracuda*.

"That's just between you and me," Warminhall said grimly.

The Barracuda slammed his cup on the Formica. "If that's how you want it, Ed, that's how it'll be, but dammit, when you've got the competition down on one knee, you need your key people fit enough to put a pistol to their heads. Can't do it with a trooper one phone call away from an iron lung."

"I knew you'd understand, Skippy."

On Friday, Gray Fox called Warminhall into his office and shut the door. "I want this malicious gossip and counter-productive speculation to cease."

"Beg pardon?"

"Hillmyer's executive secretary, the one with the fourth-grade reading level and the — God, it must take stainless-steel lingerie to keep her from bursting out all over the office — anyway, I found an anonymous note in her scrawl on my desk, informing me about Thaxter's defective pump."

"His what, Alan?"

"His heart, Eddie. He has a bad heart."

"At his age?"

"I've known about it for a year. Three salesmen he fired in Denver clued me in before we brought him up. Also, Packard — your former second-in-command, the sixth-floor janitor who I keep on retainer, and an ex-girl friend with some obscure grievance. Hanson, our Personnel Veep, goes to Judd's doctor for his prostate problem and for Vitamin E injections. Hanson reports that there'll be no difficulty so long as Judd maintains his exercise and medication regimens, and from what I can see, the lad has enough self-discipline for twenty men."

Warminhall sprang up in indignation. "I'll get right down and squelch this once and for all."

More gray, more steel. "You do that, Eddie."

WEDNESDAY MORNING'S RACQUETBALL WORKOUT CAME earlier than normal. Both Warminhall and Thaxter had breakfast meetings with important clients, so they had the court to themselves shortly after five a.m.

The Golden Boy whistled one past his ear, making the score seven-zip. Soon, Warminhall knew, Thaxter would ease up, allowing him to get back in the game. Warminhall hated being patronized. He hated losing too. He hated being in a position of prioritizing his hatreds. He hated the idea of working up a sweat at five in the morning. He lobbed a serve almost straight up.

"I do appreciate it, Ed," Thaxter said, watching patiently as the ball nearly kissed the rafters.

"Appreciate what?"

"Keeping a lid on you-know-what."

Facing away from the net, Thaxter hit the return perfectly, popping it past Warminhall's shoulder.

"I said I would," Warminhall replied, as he chased the ball. When he turned around, Thaxter was on the floor, clutching his chest.

"Ed, my pills. In my jacket pocket. And maybe — the pain, worse than ever before — you'd better get an ambulance too."

Warminhall ran into the locker room, found Thaxter's pills, and started back into the gym. He opened the door, hesitated, then closed it. He tossed the pills up and down in his hand, thinking. Whose fault would it be if The Golden Boy died? Who was taking foolish risks with his health? And when would the next Amalgamated Aircraft incident occur? Would Gray Fox forgive him the next time?

Warminhall peeked into the gym. Thaxter hadn't moved and his

eyes were closed. Warminhall waited several more minutes before calling an ambulance.

GRAY FOX HELD A SPECIAL MANAGEMENT MEETING. Its purpose was the happy announcement that Judd Thaxter was going to recover. He had just talked to Judd from his Houston hospital room, learning that the double-bypass operation had been a success. After that, some routine business was covered. Then Gray Fox released everyone but Warminhall.

"I'm sure you're aware Judd won't be coming back to his present job. We'll find something for him, of course, something involving less stress."

"He'd appreciate that, Alan."

"Accordingly, we have some mighty big shoes to fill. I discussed your consolidation proposal with Judd today. He thinks it's a fine idea having all of marketing under one man. I tend to agree because we really don't have anymore in the company qualified to take over the Southern Zone now."

Warminhall wet his lips and nodded. "Alan, you can count on me to —"

Gray Fox interrupted, "Let's not draw conclusions, Eddie. Let me finish. Naturally your name came up. Judd thought you would be the ideal man except for one thing. The morning of his attack —"

"I did what I could," Warminhall blurted. "But I'm no doctor."

"Calm down, Eddie. We all know you didn't deliberately act slowly in getting help. Perish the thought that you withheld his medication on purpose. But it does appear that you choked in a pressure situation. You froze up. With double the responsibility, double the pressure in this new position, I frankly feel that you wouldn't be up to it."

Gray Fox pressed his intercom buzzer, Seconds later, The Barracuda strode in, his eyes ablaze with energy and ambition.

"Before the meeting, I offered it to Skippy and he accepted. You and Packard will be his Zone assistants if you accept. There will be a salary increase for you and a liberal travel allowance."

"Tr-travel allowance?"

"Yes, Skippy had also prepared a consolidation proposal. It was quite similar to yours, with one major exception. Skippy wants his assistants to act as field trouble shooters. He feels that corrective action in the branch offices can best be made in person, and I agree."

The Barracuda placed a clammy paw on Warminhall's shoulder. "The Duluth office is in chaos, Eddie. I was surprised that you hadn't noticed. My secretary has already made airline reservations for you." •

Something strange was going on. Why was he here in the bathroom, murdering his wife?

Bottoms Up

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

EVEN AFTER CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED, SAM DIDN'T KNOW what was happening. The unexpected closeness of his wife Judy's face was startling, and she appeared somehow distorted and unreal to Sam's stinging eyes. He might have dismissed the whole thing as just another drunken nightmare and gone back to sleep if it weren't for the painful pressure on his forehead and the aching tenseness in his arms. And his body felt drenched, though he didn't recall that it had been raining outside. Something strange was definitely taking place, but Sam couldn't grasp its significance.

Judy's blurred face floated less than two feet from his own, and her hand was tightly clamped against his forehead, as if to push him away. Groggily, Sam studied her anguished grimace and the bulging eyes that stared intently into his own. Her hair appeared disheveled, a mass of billowing brown waves surrounding a face he couldn't quite bring into clear focus no matter how hard he tried.

Through his alcoholic haze, Sam realized that he was clutching Judy's shoulders. He was holding his breath from the strain of pressing with all his strength, and his arms throbbed. Why the hell was he so determined to keep her at arm's length? he wondered. Why were they locked together in this bizarre position? In his confusion, Sam was unable to answer these questions, but some instinctive force deep within his mind warned him not to release Judy's shoulders. Man, he must have really tied one on tonight, he decided. He'd have to go a little easier on the booze from now on.

WITH A START, SAM SENSED THAT HE WAS PEERING AT JUDY through several inches of water. That explained the distortion and the wetness. But why was he trying to drown his wife?

Sam's mind groped helplessly for an explanation to this insane situation. He forced himself to glance away from Judy's hypnotic gaze, and he saw splashes of blue and white. Blue and white? Sam taxed his groggy faculties to make sense of the colors.

The bathroom, he concluded. Of course, the bathroom in their house. Blue wall tiles and a white porcelain sink. Sam felt a rush of pride at his ability to deduce their location from the two colors. Obviously, he wasn't as far gone as he'd first suspected.

Once he knew where they were, memories of the evening's events flooded his mind. It was Friday, and, as usual, he'd stopped off at the bar on his way home from the office. When he'd finally left well after ten o'clock, he'd been extremely drunk, almost stuporous. Somehow, he'd driven home without an accident. With difficulty, he'd managed to get his key into the lock and open the side door. He'd stumbled into the kitchen and heard — What was it he'd heard? Water. Water running into the bathtub. That was it!

Then, like an avenging angel, Judy had appeared, dressing in her flowing crimson robe. Apparently, she'd been preparing to take a bath when he'd arrived home. Sam had smiled and mumbled a greeting, but Judy had ignored his feeble attempts to placate her. She'd shouted at him, called him a drunk, a good for nothing bum. Then she'd given him a hard shove, and Sam had toppled to the floor. That's when Judy had viciously kicked him. Sam vaguely recalled being enveloped in a sudden blinding rage. That was his last memory until awakening moments ago.

A black out, he thought. My mind must have gone blank on me. Without knowing what I was doing, I dragged Judy into the bathroom and threw her into the tub. My God, I'm murdering my wife! No wonder she's pushing me back so desperately.

SAM LOOKED BACK TO JUDY'S FACE, TO THAT HORRIBLE grimace. Well, this should teach her a lesson, he thought. She won't ever become violent with me again. But thank God I came to before it was too late. Already he was loosening his grip on her shoulders. He didn't want to kill her. It wouldn't be worth spending the rest of his life in prison for murdering his wife. No, what he'd do was leave her, get the divorce he should have gotten years ago and begin life anew.

Sam let go of Judy's shoulders, expecting her to rise sputtering from the water. But, to his surprise, she didn't move — her hand continued to press against his forehead, and her ferocious expression remained frozen in place.

Maybe she's already dead, Sam thought with a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. He shifted his gaze to the right and spied something that completely baffled him. In the full-length mirror on the bathroom wall, he saw Judy's reflection. Still wearing the crimson robe, she was crouched beside the bathtub.

At last understanding, Sam opened his mouth to scream, but all that emerged was a mass of bubbles that erased the mirror, the bathroom, and Judy's triumphant face. ●

Mike Shayne Mystery Makers

MELODY HEIDENREICH (*Once A Man*) writes:

I am a little bit of a woman, running to plumpness as I pass through my thirty-fifth year. I live on a dairy and grain farm in Northwestern Illinois with my husband and two children. I am, in addition to being a writer, a tractor driver, accomplished pianist, feminist, jogger, music teacher, and avid reader. Many generations of my family have lived in this area, and I have a deep interest in local history.

Today is the day. Today I will do it. I have never felt more alive. I am merciless. I move across the room with death in my hands!

Forget Me Not

by BONNIE RAUSCHER

EVEN IF YOU ARE WATCHING THE MOVIE CLOSELY you probably won't pay much attention to me. My brief scene comes in the middle of a quarrel, a dense silence broken by the opening door. Byron Crown has his back to the room, staring through the window at the vivid harbor below, his forehead pressed against the glass. Melanie Morning curls into a stricken ball on the chaise lounge, small hands clenched into fists on her pink satin knees. When the offstage props man opens

the door for me, they freeze into stillness and tension shimmers through the room.

I walk carefully across the plush carpet, a nondescript nearly-young woman in a black dress and white apron, carrying a heavy silver tea service. If you look carefully you may see that my arms are shaking. We did that scene so many times in the end I could barely lift the tray.

I carry the tea tray silently across the room to stand beside the lounge. I say, "Your tea, madam."

Melanie Morning raises her glossy blonde head, luminous eyes brimming with unshed tears. (You see, I have come to think in Hollywood cliches). She stares blankly at me for a moment, hardly seeing me (just like the day of the accident). Then, indifferently, she says, "Oh, tea. Take it away, Edna. I don't want it."

"Yes, madam," I reply. I turn on my heel and carry the tray back toward the door. And as I do Byron Crown swings around from the window and cries, "For God's sake, darling!"

"Mind the servants," Melanie says sweetly. Obviously, this is not great drama, but then if you are watching this gem from the forties you know that already.

I balance the tray dangerously on one hand to open the door. Then I am through and it closes behind me. My sole claim to cinematic glory. My ticket to celluloid immortality. But even I didn't know what would happen or I never would have made the film. It's ironic. I strained all my life toward one goal: to be an actress. I begged and fawned and grovelled just to get this bit in the latest Crown/Morning production, *Forget-Me-Not*. It was the only movie I ever made. (The handicapped had fewer rights back then and who'd want a paraplegic actress anyway?) And now I would give all eternity (oh how gladly!) to go back thirty-three years and remake my life with a different plot. Or just to clip *Forget-Me-Not* out and splice it together again somehow.

YOU, WATCHING IN THIS SHABBY RERUN THEATER, probably don't know that I died fourteen years ago. I was never very religious when I was alive. For nineteen years in a wheelchair I thought a lot about dying, but not much about an afterlife. And I could never have imagined the truth. You see, I found out that as long as their films are playing, actors and actresses don't die. Their consciousness remains, but it's limited to the actions of the film. I can't explain it very well, because I don't really understand it myself. All I know is that for fourteen years my sole awareness has been of long periods of blackness interspersed with a door opening briefly into a vignette that I had already grown to loathe when I was alive. Until six years ago there

were three or four prints making the rounds and my thoughts were scattered between them. But now all but one have gone the way of all trash, and I can begin to plan.

As long as one lone aging print flickers daily on the screen of a small theater, I am trapped to repeat endlessly that slow walk across the floor, shoulders aching, toward the low velvet lounge. I pay little attention to Beautiful Byron emoting by the window. Public idol or not, we all knew he was gay, though we had a different name for it then. All I feel for him is contempt and a bottomless boredom. But I hate Melanie.

As I cross the room toward her, I hate her with an intensity that shudders down my spine into my neat pumps. I hate her slender satin-clad body and her sleek ever-golden hair. And more than hell I hate her lovely blue eyes as she raises them to look through me like a window, seeing me less than a stagehand, less than an animal. I have never forgotten that look, and each day I endure it anew.

I am going to kill her. Oh, not because of the accident. It really *was* an accident. I was the one who slipped and missed the bannister and fell two stories into a wheelchair for the rest of my life. I am going to kill Melanie Morning for thirty-three years of dehumanizing me with her eyes, for thirty-three years of an indifferent blue stare that focuses always beyond me. (I saw it as I fell down the stairs toward her, as she stepped aside to let me tumble past without even the outstretched hand that would have saved me. My most vivid memory of that day is of chill blue eyes that marked my disaster as a momentary check in their upward progress).

Let us consider the ethics for a moment. I am already dead, and who can do worse to me? Melanie was gloriously murdered by a rejected lover, a petulant boy thirty years her junior who slashed her throat in a fine frenzy and then leaped from an eighth-floor balcony. (How I laughed when I read the newspaper accounts). So if one celluloid ghost murders another, what penalty can there be? I am very curious to see what will happen. Will all of Melanie's films across the country suddenly sizzle into nothing in their little canisters? I doubt it. I can only kill a small fragment of her, but before God I will wipe that blue stare from her face. And perhaps I will be lucky enough to achieve oblivion in the process.

YOU MAY WONDER HOW THIS IS POSSIBLE. Six years ago I began to focus all my energy to this one goal. And I discovered that as the film aged and faded I became less bound by its physical limitations. First I learned to move my eyes. As my body moved through its mechanical

track I learned to look elsewhere in the room, eventually even out into the theater. The flashing glimpses over the years as fashions changed and audiences dwindled gave me new food to drive my brain on its task.

Later I became more daring. I changed the rate of my breathing. I walked more quickly or slowly. I tested my wrists and shoulders with small flexing motions. It took a long time. Every departure from the pattern was an agonizing slow-motion shove against each frame as it passed through the projector. But I have learned to do it. The film is very thin now, and brittle, and I can move almost freely. Today I will kill her.

I tested it yesterday, to see if I could do it, to warn her that her doom is coming. I wanted her to be afraid. I faced the impersonal gaze, as always, hearing with inward glee the softly pitched, "Take it away, Edna. I don't want it." I even replied, meekly, as usual, "Yes, madam." But for five long seconds I leaned against the celluloid constraints, standing still with murder in my eyes. I believe she knew. A tiny, infinitesimal shudder permeated her satin gown. Only then did I turn and walk away.

TODAY, TODAY I WILL DO IT. Today the excruciating tedium is erased by the thudding of my heart. Each step across the room is an individual thrill. I have never been so alive. I am merciless. I am Nemesis bearing down on the lounge with death in my hands.

For the last time I face the wide empty eyes.

"Oh, tea. Take it away, Edna. I don't want it." *Remove yourself, animal, insect, you impede my view.*

I lift the heavy tray shoulder-high, arms extended, and hold it with steady wrists. I hold it until my neck muscles strain like sail ropes. I hold it until, with an audible snap, her blue eyes move and focus and meet mine. Until she sees *me, myself*, and knows *me*, and terror ripples the rigid features. It is too late for her. She cannot learn in one showing the lessons of six years' hard labor.

Then I open my hands. The massive tea service, solid silver, descends with exquisite slowness, thundering down like Armageddon onto blue eyes and golden hair and fine fragile bones as the screen turns red

THE PROJECTIONIST IN HIS DIM BOOTH jerks awake at the flapping of the broken film. Old thing burned through again. Oh well, cut it off, splice it together. It was only the bit with the maid, anyway. No one'll even notice it's gone.

Maisie was rich and beautiful — and she liked to take off her shoes in men's apartments. Ed Noon enjoyed barefooted women — even those capable of murder!

You Can't Kiss a Corpse

— by MICHAEL AVALLONE

LIKE A FAMOUS GOSSIP COLUMNIST ONCE SAID, you looked at Maisie Wendorf and went off your head. She was that beautiful. And that rich. The beauty was sub-divided by 38x22x38 with green eyes and lavender hair to match. The riches ran freely among oil leases, American Tel and Tel and a small corner on the suntan lotion market.

I spent just enough man hours on the Wendorf Diamond Case to come out ahead. But I'll let the tape recorder give you the whole thing. I was smart enough to turn it on when she climbed out of her genuine Chinchilla coat in my apartment overlooking Central Park West. She took off her shoes too. Maisie always took off her shoes in the company of male animals. Which is one reason why she was always good copy for everybody. Stiff-backed reporters from *The New York Times* and wild-eyed *papparazzi* in Rome made her name a household joke around the world.

Maisie on tape was a million dollars too. She had the kind of voice a blues singer works years to perfect. Husky, deep, with just enough vocal strip tease to curl your toes. Whether you had your shoes off or not.

Here we go. Stay tuned for the Wendorf Diamond Case.

“MARVY, ED. JUST MARVY. IMAGINE A DAME LIKE ME being dumped over the percales like that. Now that the papers have spilled the beans, it doesn’t matter. But all they have are the facts. Not the inside story. I guess it must have been easy for Tiger at that. A cat like him — Tiger was the only name for him. G-rrr-rrr. You get left alone with a man like Tiger in a bedroom and anything can happen. Even a murder.”

At that point, I mixed up a batch. She liked her Martinis very strong. Three parts gin to one vermouth.

“So I’m nearly thirty. So I’m gawgusss. But also I’m loaded. Being the fifth richest dame in the country never hurts when you meet men like Thomas Foster Tiger. Mmmm. You can still tend bar, darling. Pour me another and I’ll tell you about the week that was. The damn rags couldn’t print the whole story. I had to save some of my girlish reputation. After all, even three million dollars can’t buy dignity.”

I started on a fresh pack of Camels. Maisie Wendorf could always talk.

“So I met Mr. Tiger on the Riviera. Where else? You know I always summer on the Riviera. Those Cannes Film Festivals send me. So many Italians! The men are worse than ever, bless them. I’ve got black and blue marks all over my fanny.”

I didn’t ask to examine the scene of the crime.

“Anhoora — that’s the dress designer, sweetie — was showing me some new models when in walks Tiger. Well, Anhoora is a nice old dame of about ninety, but you should have seen her make like a school-girl when Tiger kisses her hand. Anyhoo, she makes with the intros and then beats it. I don’t know how he did it. Must have given her the high-sign. Because in two seconds flat, I’m alone in my suite overlooking the beach with the tallest, handsomest, smoothest operator in or out of a bedroom I have ever met. And that’s going some. He nearly had me down on the divan, telling me all about my baby green eyes before I recovered on the five yard line.”

She leaned back against my maroon sofa and unbuttoned her shoulder straps carelessly. Which is a helluva way to treat a Balenciaga original.

“I never wear anything under my dresses. You know that. No bras, no slips, no nothing. I like the clothes right on my skin. And if you’ll remember at the time, I was still married to Wilson Barry. That bum. All he ever wanted was my money but I never gave him any and he had no excuse to divorce me. So here I am, alone with this lady-killer and I

suddenly get a flash. I'm wearing nothing but a silk shift and even a kid knows that when you run those up, it's off to the races. Well, Mr. Tiger started in on me like there was no tomorrow. He went nuts."

Her green eyes warmed me with a look. She placed her pink tongue on the glass in her fingers and licked around the rim.

"Oh, how he made with the compliments. How he'd been dreaming about me, wanting to be near me, how he'd made a scrapbook with all my newspaper and magazine pictures. And then he made with the hands. I'm telling you, Eddie, I've been manhandled by experts in my time but old Tiger was in a class by himself. Pretty soon, I was forgetting all about my dear husband Wilson Barry and how he might be setting me up for an adultery charge with a juicy settlement and all. I kind of got into the swing of the thing with Tiger. I'm telling you. He was a cross between Cary Grant and Apollo. And you know I've always been partial to cats who look like Cary Grant. Remember my first two husbands?"

She stretched her long supple legs. Her pink knees gleamed.

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Me, Maisie Wendorf, laying down like a First Of May just because some international dreamboat comes into the room and turns it on. Well, I've got no excuse. He was marvelous. He knew the ballgame from the first inning to the last. Believe me, I've never had a more satisfactory session in the sheets. And in the middle of the day, too. On the Riviera! He had culture, Eddie boy. Culture. And a real woman is always a sucker for culture with her sex. Old Tiger was the head of the class."

I cleared my throat and she laughed.

"I felt more alive with that man, Eddie, than I have in years. Oh, I got what was coming to me. You always have to pay for something you really enjoy. I should have known what the payoff was. Yessiree, there I am getting my jollies like never before and pretty soon the damn room is flashing with camera bulbs popping and dear old Wilson Barry screaming his lungs off like the skunk he was — making the scene all the way. Of course, he was smart enough to bring a cameraman and a detective with him for witnesses. And Mr. Tiger — well, he just rolled over and lit a cigarette as calm as a snake. Me — I guess I really took it pretty well, all things considered. I just ordered them all out of the room and locked the door. Funny, I thought I would cry — but I didn't. I guess I've been around men too long. None of them ever gave me a good, fair shake for my action."

It had been a very hot July evening. It got hotter. Maisie thought nothing of standing up suddenly and kicking off her Balenciaga original. If I had doubted her at all, the proof was right before me. Her

body gleamed like a naked Venus in the dim lights of the room.

“Mmmm. These martinis are divine, Edward. You still can mix, private eye baby. Yeah, I was stuck. Caught red-handed. Dear Wilson had me dead to the sheets. A fine set of gorgeous negatives, eye witnesses and nice old Tiger for a correspondent. So, I had to give my husband his divorce and his settlement. End of my third marriage. A mistake just like the other two had been. That would have been all there was to it except I made the mistake of wanting to go down to Wilson Barry’s suite to tell him what I really thought of him. Boy, was that ever a mistake of large size.”

As naked as she was, my interest now focussed on what she was about to say. I had read the newspapers too.

“Don’t ask me why I took a gun with me. Guess I wanted to scare the fat slob a little. Don’t know what I ever saw in him as a husband. He was so gentle and kind in the beginning. That was how he hooked me. I always was a sucker for gentle people. One of the reasons I like you so much, Eddie, is that you cry when dogs get run over. Like you always said.”

I refilled her glass as she shimmered nakedly before me. Her eyes radiated lightning and thunder.

“There he was, Wilson Barry, head to head with Tiger. It would have meant nothing to me if they had been queers, really. This was worse than that. They had those negatives, all developed, and were passing them back and forth like a pair of kids in the school lavatory. A dirty joke. A real dirty joke. Laughing like a couple of ghouls over the pictures of me and Tiger in the sack. Well, I guess I must have snapped. I know what the papers said and I let them say it. Those two playboys deserved to die. I don’t care what the cops made of the details. It all worked out to my advantage.”

I asked my question at that point. She nearly bit my head off.

“Eddie, you just haven’t been listening at all! Certainly, I shot them. Both of them. Right where they stood, laughing their weird heads off. Sure, the papers claimed they had shot each other in a row over the phony adultery rap they worked on me. Sure, I protected myself and made it look like they had fought over a gun and killed each other. Dammit, Eddie, I’m no plaster saint, but I’ll die before I’ll become a private joke for two slobs like Wilson Barry and Thomas Foster Tiger!”

She started to cry then, really blubber. I had to kiss her to quiet her. That really wound things up. You never touch the Maisies of this world without getting scorched.

“Oh, Eddie, don’t hurt me like they did. Be gentle —”

There was just one more patch of small talk before the spool on the tape recorder ran out of business.

"You could have me arrested, Eddie. Turn me in and become a real famous dick. Go ahead, Eddie. I told you because I had to tell somebody, I wanted somebody I trusted to know all about this. You were always a good man, sweetie. It's all up to you. I don't care what you do tomorrow. Tonight is what counts —"

Maisie Wendorf may have been an eccentric millionairess. But even her worst enemies wouldn't call her crazy. And I could never blow the whistle on her. I'm no fink.

YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING WHY I REFERRED TO THIS mess as the Wendorf Diamond Case. Well, after she had left the next morning, I found her necklace lying on the coffee table with a Thank You note. She never would let me give it back and just before I hocked the thing and sent the cash off to my favorite charity, an orphanage on the East Side, I burned the spool of tape.

Maisie's point was pretty obvious.

Like a lot of famous women before her had learned to their contentment, diamonds are not always a girl's best friend. Sometimes they come in second!

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HAL CHARLES (*Welcome to the Big Leagues*) reports:

We're selling a lot more mystery stories lately and attempting to break into the fantasy market. We're doing a regular column on mystery writing for Jeff Meyerson's *The Poisoned Pen* fanzine. And, most importantly, we've exchanged our tennis racquets for softball bats; we play for a hotshot team with the literary moniker BANDERSNATCH. [Ed. Note: Hal Charles is a pseudonym for two English pros who practice what they teach.]

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MIKE'S



MAIL

Got something you'd like to tell Mike, the authors, the editor, the publisher, other readers? We'd like to hear from you. Write!

FLAWED?

What is going on with Brett Halliday of late? One comes to expect and tolerate the minor inconsistencies and implausibilities that occur in the stories of a monthly mystery magazine, but two of Halliday's recent Mike Shayne stories are disappointingly flawed.

In the February issue, the story ODDS ON DEATH was destroyed by a major flaw that killed the believability of it. Professor Tarrant's "system" had already earned him \$75,000 on Parrotti's gambling ship. With this amount of money, rather than risk his life by returning to the ship why didn't he catch a plane to Vegas or Atlantic City? And why didn't Shayne smell something rotten

about Tarrant's "system" from the beginning, seeing that Tarrant insisted on going to the ship. For all intents and purposes, the story ended when Shayne did not do what any jaded pulp P.I. would do: tell Tarrant to take his system somewhere where the stakes were just as high and his life would not be endangered.

As for May's story, **THE STALKER OF BISCAYNE BAY**, why do I get the feeling that the only reason this hackneyed story was published is because Halliday signed it? Jared White was obviously the killer from his first appearances. Halliday's pained efforts to keep Shayne from even considering the obvious — even after he knew that the Stalker was "on a mission to rid Miami Beach of its evil" — just was not plausible. A private eye that slow on the uptake just would not live long.

It seems that Pennell was thrown in as an afterthought to try to add some suspense to a story that had lost it early on. It didn't work.

I enjoy your magazine very much, but I hope something can be done to tighten up the rather weak storylines that your title character has been suffering from recently. I will be looking forward to reading another year's worth of carefully-edited, cleverly-crafted stories with your Mike Shayne stories setting the example of how to write, rather than how not to.

Charles L. Johnston
930 Rollins Rd.
Apt. 4
Round Lake, IL 60073

Well, first of all, Tarrant's "system" wouldn't have worked in Vegas or anyplace other than Parrotti's because he had to have the dealer working with him. In the beginning Shayne expressed his disbelief in any system, but how can a person argue against a system that really does seem to work? (By the way, there's a man in real life who is banned from playing blackjack in Nevada casinos because he has a card-counting system that gives him an edge over the casinos. How can anyone say his system can't work when he keeps winning?) On page 23 Shayne does tell Tarrant to stay away from the gambling ship because his life would be endangered. But Tarrant shows Shayne his motivation — his

"crippled daughter" which, taking it at face value, certainly sounds like a plausible reason to me for the man trying to raise money. Personally, I find it more difficult to believe someone would shoot a Pope or a President than a man would put himself in danger for his daughter.

As to the *Stalker* story, Jared White was certainly one of the suspects, but I don't feel he was "obviously" the killer. More "obvious" was Jeremiah McCoy, the old evangelist, whom Shayne considered as a prime suspect.

I read several hundred manuscripts a month here at MSMM, and one of the chief problems with stories (even good ones) is predictability. There are certain patterns which are set up which I'm sure are so familiar to devoted readers of mystery/suspense stories that there is little doubt as to their outcome. I try to avoid ones that are blatantly so, but I can't do it completely. So I look for other elements — such as humor, twists not related to the central theme, etc. — and sometimes I find them.

The only way to insure a complete surprise is for the culprit to not be in the story at all until the end — and of course that's not playing fair. I remember reading several years ago a novel by a well-known writer in which the bad guy turned out to be someone the protagonist had brushed up against in going through a doorway in the early pages, a person who was not seen nor mentioned again until the end of the book. Even then I felt cheated.

Far from being an afterthought, Pennell was an integral part of the plot, related to the main action; it was his tapes the *Stalker's* victim had stolen to use for blackmail.

You didn't mention the stories in March and April, so I guess you thought those were okay. Anyway thanks for your letter. It was nicely done, and I appreciate your taking the time to comment. I don't agree with you, but I'm painfully aware that even us omnipotent editors goof from time to time.

How about some of you other readers sounding off on this!

PULP FAN

Just a note to let you know how much I am enjoying the pulp "Revisited" spots by Frank Hamilton and Mike Avallone — these are excellent. As a pulp fan it is this feature that attracted me to

your magazine but now I find that I enjoy the lead Mike Shayne adventure in each issue. Also, enjoyed the Avallone story "Ms. Found in a Crypt" in the July issue. I hope that you will continue with the pulp "Revisited" spots and will include other pulp related stories and features in the future. Thanks for an all around enjoyable magazine.

Link Hullar
1531 Clover Trail Lane
Houston, Texas 77067

You're welcome.

TAUT AND TICKLED

Please extend my subscription for another year to Mike Shayne and send me eight past issues. I like the innovative, fresh approach of new editor Charles Fritch, the Frank Hamilton art work, and the Fred Fredericks cartoon. The Alan Warren story, "In The Cards," in July 1980 was an especially good, taut story. Ms. Vicki Carleton's spirited, sassy stories tickle me, too.

Frank D. McSherry, Jr.
314 West Jackson
McAlester, OK 74501

See, gang, we get some nice letters, too. Alan Warren has another story coming up in a few months. Vicki Carleton has an offbeat piece in our gala December Christmas issue. Also in December we see the return of Mel Ames' beautiful policewoman Detective-Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers in "The Santa Claus Killer." Did you know that subscriptions to MSMM make wonderful Christmas presents? You do now.

OFFBEAT IS OKAY

After reading "Mike's Mail" in the June issue, I was reminded once again just how narrow-minded people can be. Of course I am referring to the letter which objected to the off-beat (read "non-

detective") stories. The mystery can take any number of forms, the detective yarn being only one. Quality cannot be measured by mode of expression. Thank heaven (read "Fritch") for finding and printing stories which dare to be a little different.

This issue specifically had some winners which may not have found publication elsewhere. Gems like "Harvey's Smile," "Authoress of Death," "Shepherd of the Valley," "Edgar Allan's Trunk" . . .

Speaking of "Authoress of Death," will the fictitious Vicki Carleton be silenced by incarceration, or may we look forward to "The Prison Letters" in a future MSMM?

At any rate, congratulations and thanks for another varied and top-notch issue. Keep 'em coming!

Dick Carstead
Box 22101
Lansing, Michigan
48909

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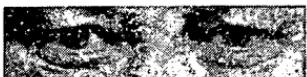
As a regular reader of your magazine, I was interested by the letter in the July issue (p. 123) regarding where your readers can find mysteries by mail-order. You mentioned another well-known mystery bookstore in your area, and we'd like to see if you could mention our store in a future issue.

We are, to my knowledge, the *only* mystery bookstore that makes an effort to solicit mail-order business, and we are the only bookstore that issues a catalog (free with self-addressed business envelope) to all interested readers.

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Chris Caswell
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Stiff Competition



BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

International espionage is an unfailingly popular subject if it is well done and some of the tension of this hazardous occupation is brought home. It most certainly is in Frank Ross's new book *The Shining Day*. The title is taken from the Nazi's phrase for the day on which Hitler was born.

The scene is World War II, the protagonist a German teacher of history who speaks fluent English and who superficially resembles a dead Briton who had been living for years in Germany. After a brief, totally inadequate training period, the teacher is sent to England as a spy, volunteered for the job by his ruthlessly Nazi wife. He is detected almost

at once, but the British string him along, and send in an agent to become friends with him, against the day that he will be useful to pass false information. It is all worked out very well and the tension never relents until the final showdown. A very good and well written book, highly recommended to lovers of dark deeds in time of war. (Atheneum, \$13.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

One of the deftest and most expert of crime writers is Pierre Audemars, whose *M. Pinaud of the Surete* is a policeman through and through. He is also a very resourceful man. When a massive international financier warns Pinaud to keep out of his way, the battle is joined. Kidnapping, heroin smuggling, and a good many other things enter into the fast moving and realistic story called *Now Dead is Any Man*. And Mr. Audemars, when he is at his best, writes with remarkable feeling and skill as witness: "And now, treading with delicate and dream-sandalled feet down the corridors of time, the memories came thronging behind the thoughts, their touch light and compassionate, their tenderness an anguish he could hardly bear..." An excellent book. (Walker, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Elizabeth Peters offers *The Curse of the Pharaohs*, a turn of the century novel, although this is not made clear in the text. It is told in the first person by an Egyptologist's wife who is maddeningly self-centered — an early women's libber with an unbeatable ego. Admitting herself to be an expert on everything, she fights her way through a dig in Egypt that uncovers a new tomb. There is a murder that is solved by both husband and wife. The impossible heroine makes this one comic as she asserts her imagined supremacy on every possible occasion. A tongue in cheek story that will probably delight many female readers. (Dodd Mead, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

A most entertaining book, despite its length, is William H. Hallahan's new offering *The Trade*. It's all about the international arms trade, which the author seems to have researched very well. The plot revolves around a bold concept — to break up the Soviet Union from

within through German plotting with possible Chinese help. A great deal of blood flows from the pages as this story unfolds, plus which there is a romance that is all too easy to forecast, but this does not impede the forward progress of the action which keeps up at a steadily mounting pace. If you read for entertainment, this one is a sure bet. (Morrow, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Elizabeth Powers debuts as a novelist with *All That Glitters*. Written from a feminine viewpoint, much of the story revolves around the orthodox Jewish businessmen who comprise the New York diamond industry. There are some quite good portraits, particularly of a failed businessman who is always concocting a deal that will pull all of his problems out of the fire and into the profit column. There is also an inside look at the Waldorf Towers, but the story still lumbers somewhat and the heroine isn't always all we would like her to be. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

A remarkably good procedural called *Final Cut* is by an author new to this column — Pamela Chais. The star of the piece is Beverly Hills police detective Bud Bacola who was once a child star and has been living it down ever since. He is a good and thoroughly believable cop who is called upon to investigate a high flying agent who never returns phone calls except for very successful client. When he is done in, it is Bud's job to track down the killer in the jungles of Hollywood. Lots of sex and lots of action by a well schooled writer who has learned the tricks of the trade, undoubtedly many of them from her late father, the screenwriter F. Hugh Herbert. (Simon and Schuster, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Ever since his remarkable *The Defection of A.J. Lewinter*, we have been looking for more from Robert Littell. Now he has come through with *The Amateur*, another spy story, this time laid principally in Prague. When a CIA desk man who works in codes and ciphers has his girl friend murdered by a terrorist, he successfully blackmails the Company into training him and putting him into the field. This is reluctantly done with every possible delaying tactic, but he comes through it

all and then goes after the man who killed his fiancee. Some of the plot twists can be seen coming and the Agency takes a beating as it so often does for duplicity, since its objectives do not coincide with the single dedication of the protagonist. This is a good job, and well done, but still not fully up to the standards set by A.J. Lewinter. (Simon and Shuster, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Not quite so potent is Alexandra Roudybush in her new work *Blood Ties*. This is a rambling novel that covers much of the lifetime of a wealthy young woman who gets into intelligence work. We see very little of her activity here since the book deals largely with the heavy who marries her sister and her bossy mother who wants to run everything. The story covers a considerable span of time and finally resolves more from running down than from a crackling climax. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The very prolific and capable Bill Knox brings us Superintendent Thane once more, this time in *A Killing in Antiques*. Again the Scottish Crime Squad is featured as several different gangs of thieves are raising havoc with the antiques business. There is plenty of realistic police clues until some answers are finally uncovered. This is not a memorable book, but a good, competent one well worth reading. (Doubleday, Crime Club \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: Matthew Head brings Dr. Mary Finney to Paris in *Murder at the Flee Club*. This popular medical missionary is also found, back in Portuguese West Africa in the well-known *The Cabinda Affair*. Both of these works are at the least semi-classic in the genre; if you don't have them, get these Perennial editions at \$2.25 (Cabinda) and \$2.50 (Flee Club) while they're available. Peter Dickinson's *One Foot in the Grave* is a virtuoso performance available from Penguin at \$2.95. An Irish background and considerable sex enliven *The Private Wound* by Nicholas Blake; Perennial, \$2.25. Michael Gilbert, who never swings at a bad pitch, is in fine form in *The Empty House*. The British lawyer/novelist is at the head of both professions. (Penguin, \$2.50)

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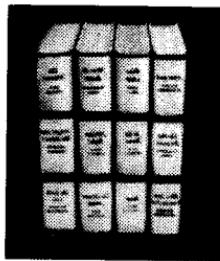
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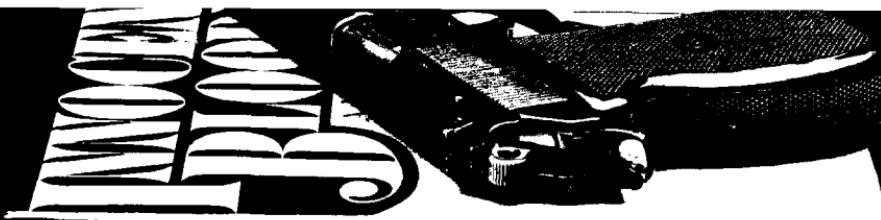
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